



BLUE AND GRAY WEEKLY



Stories of Brave Northern and Southern Boys in the Civil War.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1904 by Frank Tousey, 24 Union Square, New York.

No. 14.

NEW YORK, NOVEMBER 11, 1904.

Price 5 Cents.

HELD AT BAY; OR, THE BOYS IN GRAY BAFFLED.

By LIEUT HARRY LEE



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CHAPTER I.

GENERAL LONGSTREET'S PLAN.

In the history of our great Civil War, there is recorded no battle more desperately fought than that of Mechanicsville.

McClellan was well embarked upon his disastrous campaign against Richmond. The forces of Lee and Longstreet and Hill were the barrier which he in vain tried to break.

Brave men and true laid down their lives uselessly in that memorable Seven Days' Battle.

We might write volumes of their heroic deeds and desperate valor. In the Confederate army there was a feeling that they were defending their homes and firesides, and men fought as men have seldom fought before.

Early in the war a band of Richmond youths had formed a militia company, equipped and armed themselves, and offered their services to the Confederacy.

They were of the best blood of the South, being mostly sons of wealthy families. They called themselves the Virginia Grays.

Their captain was Will Prentiss, the son of Colonel Jeff Prentiss, one of President Davis's warmest friends.

Will Prentiss was a youth of more than ordinary parts, both mentally and physically. He was of fine figure and a natural soldier.

His officers were youths of equal capabilities: First Lieutenant Fred Randolph, Second Lieutenant Dick Walton, First Sergeant Joe Spotswood, and others.

The Virginia Grays had distinguished themselves at once in the battles along the Chickahominy and at Fair Oaks.

So much confidence did President Davis place in these youthful soldiers that he commended them often to General Lee for special service, scouting and otherwise.

So, while both armies were facing each other along Beaver Dam Creek, the Grays suddenly found themselves called upon to undertake a task which proved a serious tax upon their ability and courage.

Captain Will Prentiss had been waiting orders all the morning, and was not surprised when General Longstreet's orderly entered his tent.

The orderly saluted.

"Captain Prentiss, General Longstreet sends his compliments, and desires you to report at his tent at once."

"Please give my compliments to General Longstreet in return, and tell him that I will be on hand at once."

The orderly saluted and departed.

Captain Prentiss hastily buckled on his sword. Lieutenant Randolph, who was present, said:

"Well, Will, I wonder what is up now?"

"I don't know. I hope it is something lively. I am spoiling for a chance to fight the enemy."

"We are likely to get it."

"You think so."

"I do. I heard that all the generals had a conference this morning. They are going to try and flank McClellan at the dam. I believe they will try and turn the Union left. I think we are wanted for scout duty in front of A. P. Hill's division."

"Well, I don't care!" cried Will. "Anything will suit me. I just want a chance to do something. We will get rusty lying here."

"That's right! All the boys feel the same way!"

It did not take Will Prentiss long to make his way to General Longstreet's tent. As he entered, the general arose from the table and gripped his hand.

"I am glad to see you, Prentiss," he said. "I have some sharp work for you."

"Indeed!" said Will, readily. "I shall be glad of that. What is it?"

"I have just conferred with all the members of Lee's staff, and the decision has been reached to try and turn the Union left. We believe it can be done. If the move succeeds, we will make a show of their crack general, McClellan."

And General Longstreet chuckled. Will was much interested.

"I hope it can be done," he said. "One victory now would have a great moral effect upon the country."

"You are right, my boy. Of course, we are fighting well in a defensive way, but we need a victory."

"I think so, sir."

"Very good! Now to get to the point. Prentiss, I want to send you and your company ahead, down the Chickahominy for a ways. Then you are to swing north along the Beaver Dam Creek and cross below Seymour's position. See here!"

Longstreet produced a hastily drawn map. It showed the position of the Union forces on the other side of the creek.

"You see," said the great Confederate general, "we are going to cross here." He placed his finger on a black line.

"Already a bridge is being thrown across. You are to march along the other bank and scout as far as you can back of Seymour's lines. It is possible that you might cut off a supply train."

"I want you to know that it is a very dangerous undertaking. You may be cut off and captured. You may have to fight. But we want a demonstration of this sort made in the rear of Seymour for the purpose of causing him a little trouble in his rear while we cross the creek. Do you see?"

"I understand exactly," said Will. "I will endeavor to carry out your plan to a dot."

"I feel sure that you will, and I believe that you will

succeed. When you hear the guns which will announce that we are giving battle you may retreat and join us at the Beaver Dam."

"I will start at once."

"Yes. I wish you would. There is no time to lose."

Will saluted and left the tent. He was delighted with the prospect which was before him.

It promised plenty of excitement and risk. To a soldier, this is a matter of much importance.

When Will got back to his own camp, he was met by Lieutenant Fred Randolph. The young lieutenant's face showed that he was eager to know the news.

"All right, Fred," said Will, with a nod. "You may prepare for a long march. We are off on scout duty."

"It is just as I guessed?"

"Yes."

"Good! I am glad of it! All the boys will be glad. I can have them in marching order within an hour."

"I wish you would. Discard all useless equipment. The march will be a rigid one, and we must be in light marching order."

"Very well."

Captain Prentiss went into his tent and prepared at once for his enterprise. He had maps of the region, which he studied for a little while.

He was thus engaged when Sergeant Spotswood appeared, and said:

"Captain Prentiss, there is a man out here who claims to be a scout, and he says General Longstreet sent him to see you."

"Show him in," said Will.

The next moment the visitor entered. He was a tall, lantern-jawed man, with furtive gray eyes.

"Are you Captain Prentiss?" he asked, with the drawl peculiar to Georgia.

"I am," replied Will. "What can I do for you?"

"General Longstreet sent me here with this message for you."

The man handed Will a letter. The young captain took it and opened it. What he read was comprehensive:

"Dear Prentiss: This will introduce you to Joe Preston, the scout. He is an able man at this profession, and is trusted by our Congress. He will accompany you, and I think you will find him of much aid. He has the cunning of a fox and the scent of a hound. I wish you luck in your enterprise. Yours ever,

"LONGSTREET."

Will Prentiss looked at Preston, and then held out his hand.

"I am glad to know you," he said. "We shall be glad of your services, Preston."

"Thank ye," replied the scout. "I'll do the best I kin by ye!"

"That is good enough! You are familiar with this region?"

"I reckon I am."

"What have we most to fear?"

Preston shrugged his shoulders.

"Seymour will be busy in front, and won't be able to bother ye much. But if ye should happen to run up ag'in Cool Jim Kelley an' his raiders, you kin bet ye would have trouble!"

"Oh! I have heard of this man Kelley! Let me see! He is not wholly an accredited Union officer, is he?"

"He's a durned pirate! That's what he is! He'll never give quarter to no one if he kin help it. He's butchered more honest people in Virginia than you kin imagine. Yas, Cool Jim is a bad one!"

"Let me see! I think I recall a story about this fellow," said Will. "If I remember rightly, he applied for a commission in our army and was refused on account of bad character."

"Yas. He's the chap!" cried the scout. "President Davis cast him off!"

"Exactly," said Will, as he compressed his lips. "Well, I'll tell you, Preston. I hope I will be able to run across this fellow. Nothing would please me more than to meet him."

"Ugh! He has a big gang back of him. They are worse than any Western guerillas ye ever heard of. I hope, for your sake, ye won't meet 'em."

"If we meet Kelley we will fight him," said Will, determinedly. "I believe an organized company can defeat an unorganized regiment."

"P'r'aps it kin," said Preston, dubiously, "but you'll find Cool Jim a bad one ter handle."

In due time, the Grays were ready for the march.

As they fell into line, all equipped for their arduous march, they presented a fine appearance. They were lightly equipped and were in high spirits.

The weather was warm, it being the month of June, so there could be no danger in sleeping on the ground, wrapped in their blankets. This made it much easier to carry camp effects.

It was now past the hour of noon. The distance they must march was not so very great. They ought to be able to make the distance to the Beaver Dam Creek by nightfall.

They could cross at night or wait until morning, as the occasion demanded, but certainly by the following day they would be in the enemy's country.

Preston walked ahead with Captain Prentiss. Down the turnpike road they marched at a good swing.

The sun was hot and the road dusty. In the middle of the afternoon they rested in the shade of a grove of oaks.

But when nightfall came, as Will had anticipated, they were on the banks of the creek.

At this point it was too deep to ford, but a raft was quickly constructed, and all was made ready for the crossing.

Beyond lay the region of peril, the region where they were to have most exciting experiences, but the Grays, as they bivouacked that night, recked little of this.

They were in high spirits, as good and hearty boys

should be. When taps were sounded, however, they rolled up in their blankets, and went to sleep.

Will Prentiss, however, did not retire as early as the rest.

Upon the boy captain rested a great responsibility. The private soldier had only to obey and to follow.

The captain, however, must direct all movements and plan for the safety and success of his men. Upon him and his superior judgment depended their very lives.

So Will Prentiss could be pardoned for sleeplessness and many serious thoughts. It was his lot.

Pickets had been posted and as many precautions taken as if they were in the presence of the enemy.

Indeed it was not at all improbable that some foraging or raiding band of Union soldiers might be on this side of the creek, and a surprise attack was always to be feared.

So Will caused all precautions to be taken. He walked around the picket line with the scout, Preston, near the midnight hour.

When they arrived on a little eminence, from which a distant view of the country could be had, a luminous glow was seen against the northern sky.

"Do ye see that?" asked the scout. "Wall, it's the camp fires of Seymour's men. They are not ten miles away."

Will watched the glow as it faded and grew bright by turns. Suddenly a light flashed up, vivid and glaring, at a much nearer point. Preston gave a little exclamation.

CHAPTER II.

A DARK DEED.

"What is that?" asked Will, in surprise. "That is not two miles from here!"

Preston whistled softly, and studied the light for some moments. It grew larger, and speedily assumed the aspect of a large conflagration.

"Of course, I don't know," said the scout, "but if I was ter give my honest word, I should say it was a burning house!"

"A burning house?"

"Yas."

"Ah! Fired by accident, I suppose?"

"Not much! Fired by them durned guerillas under Cool Jim!"

Will gave a mighty start. His eyes flashed and he set his lips tightly.

"Do you really think that it is some farm-house fired by Kelley?"

"It's a farm-house beyond doubt, and it's like Kelley's work to fire it. That's all, and ther best I kin say."

Will was silent a moment. Many startled thoughts flashed through his brain. A great impulse was upon him.

The boy captain of the Grays was a great lover of justice. It stirred him deeply to see a great wrong enacted.

His desire to punish the evil-doer was very great.

"But—I don't see how the Union generals can sanction such work as that," he said, in surprise. "I understand they are all intelligent and humane men. To burn the house of a poor farmer and turn him out homeless is an outrage and a crime. The perpetrator ought to hang."

"That is true, captain. But, ye see, Kelley gets out of it on the pretense that it's an expedient of war ter prevent givin' shelter or furnishin' supplies to us or our soldiers."

"That is a contemptible way of making war," said Will. "It is an unnecessary destruction of property."

"Jest what I think."

"I am tempted to call the boys to arms and march over there."

"Cross ther creek ter-night?"

"Yes."

"Don't do it, captain. I'll take a look over there myself, if you wish, an' I'll kinder locate Kelley, if it's him, so mebbe ye kin hit him a hard blow in the morning."

"Good!" cried Will. "I am half-tempted to go with you!"

"Come along!" said the scout, eagerly. "I'll go bonds ter bring yer back safely!"

"It's done!" cried Will. "I'll notify my lieutenant. How shall we equip ourselves?"

"Take a musket an' a knife. I advise yer to leave them shoulder straps behind."

"I'll wear a private's coat. Let us get there as quickly as possible."

"All right, captain."

The scout strode away, and Will went back to the camp. He at once aroused Fred Randolph. The young lieutenant sprang to his feet.

"What's the matter?" he cried, rubbing his eyes. "What has happened?"

"Fred, I want you to take charge here until I return," said Will.

"Where are you going?"

"I am going on a little scouting tour with Preston."

Fred took charge of matters at once. Will was quickly ready. Preston had now appeared, and they were ready for the trip.

In a few moments they had left the camp, and were on their way. They left the last picket, and were soon on the highway on the other side of the creek. They pressed forward rapidly.

The burning buildings were not more than two miles away, and Preston finally decided that they belonged to a planter, whose name was Mortimer Craven.

"Thar ain't no finer man in ther Old Dominion than Mort Craven," he declared, earnestly. "An' his darter, Harriet, is one of ther pootiest gals, too."

"Well, he is in bad luck just now," declared Will.

"Yas, an' it's a shame. It's allus them kind of men thet gits ther wust of it. Hang me, but I'd like ter see thet Kelley put up ag'in a tree an' shot full of holes."

"That will undoubtedly be his fate some day," said Will.

"At least, that is what I'll do with him!"

"If yer git him!"

"Yes!"

"Wall, rest easy on thet. I don't believe ye'll git him right away. He's as slippery as soap."

Every moment now they were drawing nearer to the great blaze. Suddenly turning a bend in the road, they came full upon the scene.

It was a disheartening spectacle. The fine plantation house and its outbuildings were but a blazing heap of embers.

No living being was in sight. The raiders had gone.

"They ain't here," said Preston. "You bet, they have skipped out. They don't keer to stay long round ther place whar they do sich work as that. What did I tell yer? See thet?"

The scout's foot spurned the stiffening body of a negro, who had been shot through the head.

Murder, with other things, had been the result of the visit of the Union raiders. The sight was a hard one.

Will Prentiss passed from one scene of horror to another. Suddenly both were given a great start.

A husky voice cried:

"Mercy, good friends! Mercy! Help a poor farmer! Give me help!"

In the darkness, under the cover of a shrub, lay a man. He was able to support himself on his elbow.

"Who are you?" asked Will, in a kindly tone. "What has happened to you?"

"I am Mortimer Craven, the owner of this plantation," he replied. "I have lost all in this world that is near and dear to me. I am dying, but before I go, I want to talk with an honest man."

"Wall, he's here!" cried Preston, the scout. "Talk with him, captain!"

Will bent down over the wounded planter. He learned the whole story.

It was really the work of Cool Jim Kelley. The guerilla had stripped the plantation and left the owner for dead.

The tale told by Craven was a thrilling one. The guerilla had descended upon him unexpectedly, and he had been partly stripped of his worldly belongings.

The worst thing of all, however, was the forcible abduction of his fair and talented daughter, Harriet. By her Craven had set his life.

As Will listened to the tale, his veins tingled. He longed to have the Grays with him and give the villains a hard chase.

He would endeavor to rescue Harriet, but for the present it was necessary to minister to the planter, who was dying.

Craven, even in his dying moments, seemed to place instinctive confidence in Will.

He took the youth's hand, and said:

"I like your face, lad! I know you are good and true! I know you would answer a dying man's prayer!"

"I will do all I can!" said Will.

"I knew you would. I want you to care for Harriet."

She hasn't a friend in the world now, save me, and I am on my way out of this world."

Will spoke cheering words. The dying man listened, and clasped Will's hands.

"God bless you, boy!" he cried. "I feel sure you will right this great wrong. I shall die with greater resignation. I want you to see that villain hanged."

"I promise you that I will do all in my power to bring about that end," said Will. "Have no fear of that."

"I feel—that the end is near," said the dying man.

Those were his last words. In a moment more his soul had departed.

For some time, Will Prentiss and the scout stood reverently over the dead man. It was one of those sad episodes of cruel war that stir the heart to its uttermost depths.

"Poor cuss!" said Preston, in rough sympathy. "It was hard fer him to die an' know his darter was in ther hands of that scoundrel Kelley!"

"Yes," said Will, quietly, "but we must do the last sad duty by this poor fellow, Preston. Help me compose his form, and when we march by here in the morning I will see that he is buried on his own farm."

Together they straightened the body and closed the dead man's eyes. Then they covered him with a blanket, which they found near by, and left him.

Back to the creek they made their way, and recrossed to the camp.

It was useless to attempt giving pursuit to the guerillas that night, as Will knew well.

So he did not call the Grays from their sleep. By this time, he felt the need of rest himself.

So he rolled himself up in his blanket and was soon deep in slumber. Preston, the scout, did the same.

But with the break of day all in the camp of the Grays were astir. Rations were given out, and later followed roll-call. Then the boys fell in, to make the crossing of the creek.

By the use of the raft, they succeeded in crossing in due time. Then they marched down the highway, and soon came to the ruins of Mortimer Craven's house.

By Will's orders, the dead farmer was buried, and Joe Spotswood, whose training had been clerical, said prayers over the grave.

Then the Grays marched on.

It was now found necessary to proceed with caution. Down the winding highway they proceeded slowly.

Scouts and videttes were sent far ahead, to make sure that the coast was clear. At the hour of noon, after slow progress, the little company halted in the yard of a small farmhouse.

They were dusty and hungry, but Will could only order a small allowance of rations. It looked as if they must soon begin to forage for the wherewithal to sustain life.

The owner of the farm-house, a typical Virginia farmer, came out and made himself agreeable.

"You bet the Yankees will git enough of this war before they're done," he said, sententiously. "Wait till Stonewall

Jackson gits headed for Washington! He'll sweep everything afore him!"

"We must not be too confident," said Will. "The Yankees are brave and can fight. Then they have the United States Treasury back of them."

"Thet's all right," said the farmer, wagging his head. "We're fighting fer our homes an' firesides, an', you bet, we're in the right an' we'll win."

"I hope we will."

"There was a hull regiment of them went by here yesterday. I reckon they was on their way to jine Seymour."

"At what hour yesterday?" asked Will, with interest.

"About dark, I think," replied the farmer. "I say, Pete! Come out here!"

A small boy, with a precocious air, came out of the house.

"What time did them Yanks pass hyer?"

"About six o'clock, pap!" replied the boy. "They ain't far from here at this very minute, nuther!"

"What!" exclaimed Will, in surprise. "Near here at this moment?"

"Yes, sir. You bet. They ain't a mile from here," asserted the boy.

This was astonishing news, and it need hardly be said that Will was not a little concerned.

It was odd that the scouts had discovered no trace of the foe. Will knew the necessity of at once locating them.

"See here, my boy," he said, "you shall be well rewarded if you will show me where the Yankees are."

"Don't want any reward," replied the lad. "D'ye see thet road down thar thet crosses this one?"

"Yes."

"Wall, you jest turn into it, an' go out through thet leetle cut in the hills. You'll run onto their pickets right away, you bet."

"How strong are they?" asked Will.

"I dunno! I reckon you kin whip 'em!"

"Have they any communication with the main army, or a chance for reinforcements?"

"I don't think so, but I jest kain't say," replied the boy. "Thar's a right smart heap of 'em."

Will did some thinking. He wondered greatly if this could be the bushwhacking band of Cool Kelley.

But the farmer's boy declared that they were regular U. S. troops, and wore good, new uniforms.

"They ain't no guerillas," he said, confidently. "They're reg'lar sogers, you bet."

Will threw the boy a coin. Then he turned to Fred Randolph and said:

"We must find out what that means. If they are a small detachment we will cut them off."

"All right, captain. What is your order?"

"Fall in, and march slowly down the crossroad. Send out a dozen or more men as skirmishers."

The order was quickly obeyed.

Down the crossroad the Grays slowly marched. The country was rolling and the road so winding that little could be seen ahead.

Suddenly a shot was heard just ahead. It was followed by another.

"The skirmishers have hit upon something," said Will. "I wonder if that will give the alarm?"

"It surely will," said Fred, "but we might as well know our fate. This suspense is too much."

The Grays now pressed on and came suddenly upon a change of scene. In the foreground was a small farm house, before which flowed a brook. A small bridge beneath a large tree spanned it. Beyond, the road led a winding course past another house and over a ridge.

The scene was a pastoral one, and typical of that part of Virginia. The place bespoke peace and contentment, and the harsh display of war seemed out of place here.

But, as the Grays came up and took position behind a stone wall near the farm-house they saw the skirmish line on the brow of the hill beyond.

That the enemy was located was proved by the fact that on the bridge lay the dead body of a Union picket.

Suddenly, the rattling fire of muskets was heard in the distance. Then the flag of the Union troops was seen above the crest of the eminence.

The Grays, held in restraint under cover of the stone wall, seemed to straighten as one person, and as if to resist the shock of an attack.

Then Joe Spotswood and a number of the skirmishers came running back down the road in alarm.

Will was not looking for an attack. He believed the foe would fall back.

"The foe are coming!" shouted the sergeant, as he came running across the bridge. Will Prentiss was surprised at this unexpected report, but the Virginia Grays quickly formed for the defense.

The moment the Union soldiers appeared above the rise they opened fire. This was answered by the Grays.

At first the fire was spattering and desultory. But presently, as the Union troops poured over the hill and formed, regular volleys became the order.

Will Prentiss was brave to a fault.

But he was not reckless, and it was easy for him to see that he could not hope to hold his ground against the overwhelming numbers.

So he ordered his men to fall back.

Slowly the Grays retired, fighting well all the while. But the Union forces, strangely enough, did not come after them.

They seemed content with simply holding the road and the crest beyond it. Things might have gone hard with the Grays had the Union troops chose to organize a pursuit.

For, with the creek in their rear and no hope of reinforcements the result might have been disastrous.

This very fact puzzled Will.

While he was content that the Union troops took this stand, he was, on the other hand, deeply chagrined and disappointed.

This body of troops blocked his way. He had hoped to have got further on his way before being held up.

What was worse yet, scouts brought in a thrilling report.

A Union wagon train with supplies for Seymour was not two miles beyond. It would have been the simplest matter in the world to have captured it.

But they were literally held at bay by Colonel Carlton's regiment. For this, Will learned, was the name of the Union officer.

The thought of the rich wagon train and its capture and destruction was a powerful temptation to Will. If he could get around Carlton or drive him from his path he could make one of the most daring dashes of the war.

It chagrined the boy captain as well as angered him. But he could not think of jeopardizing his men by an open attack.

He must accomplish by strategy what he could not hope to by force.

CHAPTER III.

HELD AT BAY.

The position held by the Grays was a most exasperating one.

It was not Will's disposition to, for one moment, think of turning back. He had essayed the enterprise of gaining Seymour's rear and he was determined to do it.

But Colonel Carlton lay a stumbling block in his path. It looked as if he was bound to remain there.

He would not come to the attack. On the other hand, he would not retreat. There was no doubt but that the wily General Seymour had placed him there to hold the road against just such attacks as this meditated by the Grays.

The Grays kept up a warm exchange of shots all the while.

"Well, Will," said Fred Randolph, "what are we going to do about it? We can't get by that obstacle."

"It looks bad," said the boy captain, knitting his eyebrows. "We need more men. If we could press Carlton a little we might make him give ground."

"He would then send for reinforcements."

"I suppose so."

"Do you know what I think?"

"What?"

"We have met with failure. We can never carry out this project."

"We will never abandon it," said Will, determinedly, "you may be sure of that, Fred. I believe some plan will yet suggest itself."

"It must occur at once. The wagon train will soon be safe beyond our reach."

Will knew this well enough. His brain was busy evolving a plan.

He had enough on his hands now. Apart from his enterprise was the one he had assumed of attempting the rescue of Harriet Craven.

Even as he was pondering upon the subject, Sergeant Spotswood appeared and saluted, saying:

"Captain Prentiss, a man has applied to be admitted to the lines. He wants to see you upon urgent business."

"Let him in and hear his story," said Preston, the scout.

"Bring him to me," said Will.

The sergeant disappeared. When he returned he was accompanied by a young man of about thirty years of age, whose appearance would attract attention anywhere.

He was tall and straight as an arrow. His features were regular and darkly handsome. His eye held a firm, resolute light.

"Is this Captain Prentiss?" he asked, quietly, removing his hat and bowing gravely to Will.

"I am Captain Prentiss," said Will. "What can I do for you?"

"My name is Sylvester Brown. I am just from California, where I made a fortune in the mines. My home at present is Raleigh, North Carolina. I had come to Richmond to offer my services to the Congress, when I learned some facts which have filled me with horror, and have completely changed my life plans."

Will had listened with surprise and some interest.

"Indeed!" he said. "May I ask in what manner that should interest me?"

"I presume in no manner whatever, sir. I say this simply in introduction. I will come to my subject. If I am right, last night you bivouacked on the other side of the creek."

"I did," replied Will.

"Did not you and this gentleman here," indicating Preston, "pay a visit to the ruins of a farm house? Did you not kindly take the last request of the murdered farmer and give him a decent burial?"

"We did," said Will.

"For that you shall be rewarded by a Higher Power. Captain Prentiss, as a friend of that broken family, I want to thank you. In these trying times it seems good to meet a man of honor and principle like yourself."

"We would have been far from humane to do aught else," said Will. "I am sure it was a sad case. I have pledged myself to do all I can to bring the guilty scoundrel to punishment."

"You mean Kelley, the guerilla?"

"Yes!"

"Captain Prentiss, I beg that you will take me into your service. I am rich, but my wealth as well as my life is at your service. I went away to California five years ago, and when I left here I carried the promise of Harriet Craven to wait for my return, when she would become my wife.

"There was a heavy mortgage on Craven's farm. I returned with the wealth to pay it off and make happy his last days.

"I find him dead, his buildings burned and his daughter, the girl I love, carried away a captive by the dark scoundrel, who from this hour I shall hunt to the death."

The young Californian's voice rose with dramatic volume and his eyes flashed fire.

He was deadly in earnest, and as Will realized what it

meant to him he felt deeply for him. The young captain held out his hand.

"Sylvester Brown, I am glad to meet you, and I can assure you of all possible aid in my power to carry out your purpose. You have my heartfelt sympathy."

"Thank you, Captain Prentiss. I cannot tell you in words how full my heart is. But I shall not rest nor cease my efforts until I have rescued her, or avenged her."

"Count upon the Virginia Grays to assist you in every way."

"My gratitude is deep. I confess that I am at a loss to know where to look for the villain. I would like to become a member of your company and perhaps in your scouting trip we may come across Kelley's gang."

"There is no doubt that we will," said Will. "I will give you a uniform and musket if you desire and gladly accept your services."

"I think it is the best plan. I must have assistance. I can do nothing alone."

"It is your best plan," said Preston the scout. "I might as well tell you, Captain Prentiss, that this is my doings. I met Mr. Brown last night while out on a scouting trip after you retired. I sympathized with him and advised him to take this course."

"I think you advised him well," said Will, "and I will bend every effort to realize his wishes."

A few moments later, in due form, Sylvester Brown was mustered in as a member of the Grays.

He was given a uniform and a musket and at once went on duty.

Meanwhile the day was waning. Will was more than anxious to be on the move. But still Carlton's regiment lay in his path.

Unless he could evade or defeat Carlton, the guns of Mechanicsville would soon be booming, and he would have to return with the Grays without having accomplished his object.

This might have worried an ordinary person, but Will Prentiss was not of that order.

He staked everything upon carrying out his enterprise. To be blocked and baffled in this way was not pleasant.

"Confound that fellow!" he growled. "Why don't he come down and attack us or draw us on? Anything is better than remaining here in statu quo."

"From what I know of Carlton," said Preston the scout, "that is his great point. He is deadly slow and exceedingly careful of his men. He is cautious but thick."

"An easy man to whip, once he was drawn into battle."

"Just so!"

"Well, I wonder if we can't in some way draw him in," said Will. "Of course it would be folly for me to attack him with my small force and meet with a repulse."

"Yes!"

"But if he would only attack us we could slip around him and give him a hard chase, which would enable us to carry out our purpose at the same time."

"There may be a way to do that," said Preston. "It's a good chance. P'raps I kin figger it out."

"I wish you would. Hello! What's that? Has the unexpected happened?"

The sound of firing by volley was heard. Will rushed out of his tent. He saw a Union line of blue on the nearest ridge of land.

This line was firing at the Confederates. It looked like a challenge, and it is needless to say that Will took up the gage at once.

He ordered the Grays out in line of battle.

They crept up behind fences and walls, answering volley for volley. Will had already planned a flanking charge when all was over.

The Union line retired. Firing ceased and the challenge seemed to be withdrawn.

"What do you think of that?" cried Fred Randolph. "They are a brave lot of chaps, ain't they?"

"Don't blame the men," said Preston. "It ain't their fault."

"No, it's the fault of their officers," said Will. "Really it is disgusting. I don't see what their game can be."

"It looks as if they simply meant to hold you at bay," said Preston. "P'raps that's the hull thing. Seymour may have got word that you were down here, and he has sent Carlton down to hold you."

"All right!" said Will, grimly. "He'll find perhaps that we are not so easy to hold."

The Grays crept almost to the summit of the ridge where their late foes had been. The Union infantry had withdrawn to higher ground.

Will was sorely tempted to move on to attack.

But he did not. He was too good a general to risk all in one throw of the dice. There were other things to consider. With the smaller force he must play a more defensive game.

But on the other hand he was not satisfied to remain in his present position. He had decided upon a daring move under cover of darkness.

It would have seemed easy to one not versed in military science for Will Prentiss to have marched his Grays rapidly around Carlton's position.

This Will could have done without much trouble. But the knowledge that it was bad strategy restrained him.

By so doing, of course, he placed himself between two fires. With Seymour in his front and Carlton now in his rear he would have been in a trap.

Tactics demanded properly that he should either drive Carlton or force him in some way to fall back.

But this, with his small force, Will could not do. So he made up his mind to adopt another plan.

This plan was one of the most daring ever conceived. How it worked we have yet to see.

Darkness came once more.

All day Carlton's regiment had lain in front of the Grays and had made but little demonstration. When nightfall came Will called Preston aside.

"I say, my friend," said the young captain, "I have a plan for deceiving the foe, and if it works we shall win great ends. If it fails we shall lose heavily. But I reckon on its winning."

"Good," said the scout, "that's the proper way to look at it."

"I propose to leave one-third of my men right here. The same camp-fire will burn, the same line preserved, the same pickets and the same front made. But with the other two-thirds I am going to make a forced march around Carlton and strike the supply train."

"I believe we can do it and get back safely before Carlton will hear of it. Then we can return."

The scout was silent a moment. The proposition seemed to stagger him.

"Wall, I don't know jest what to say," he said. "It takes my breath away. Suppose Carlton attacks while you are away? Only a handful of men will oppose him."

"Let them fall back. It will be all the better for us."

For some while the scout was silent. He was weighing the matter.

"Wal," he finally said, "have ye got yer mind made up to do it?"

"Yes, if it is not unadvisable."

"Then go ahead and do it. P'raps ye'll hit it lucky. I like yer pluck!"

"Then it's settled. You will guide us to the supply train?"

"I will."

"Very good! I will have the Grays ready in an hour. We will set out as soon as it is dark."

"All right! I shall lead ye through the woods until we reach the Elton's Mill road. Then we can strike over to the Mechanicsville turnpike and hit the supply train. It will surely pass that way to-night."

Now that Will had made up his mind to adopt this daring ruse he was in high spirits and entered into the plan with great relish.

He was determined to make a success of it. While acting rapidly he, however, did not yield to recklessness. Everything was weighed carefully before being adopted.

The Grays who were to be left to keep up the illusion in front of Carlton were under command of Second Lieutenant Dick Walton. Fred Randolph was to accompany Will.

Very rapidly the arrangements were made. The night was dark, and when the little company were ready for their mad dash, Preston took his place as their guide.

They quietly slipped out of the camp and silently marched to the south. They kept on for several miles to make sure of doubling on Carlton's pickets.

They then made a large detour, calculated to bring them in Carlton's rear. The old scout knew every foot of the region and was able to select the best route. Everything was progressing favorably, and he said:

"I reckon the Mechanicsville turnpike ain't more'n an hour's march now, Captain Prentiss. That supply train won't be along till after midnight, so ye'll have a good chance to get it."

"That is good!" said Will. "We will wait for it."

Just then an unexpected thing happened.

CHAPTER IV.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS.

What happened was certainly most unexpected. The Grays were marching along in the edge of a patch of forest and in irregular line.

Will and the scout were ahead. Fred Randolph was a few steps in the rear.

Suddenly a sharp voice came out of the gloom, and the click of a musket lock was heard.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"A picket!" gasped Will. "What is this, Preston? Have we lost our bearings?"

"No!" whispered the old scout. "It's some small detachment. Wait a bit."

He walked forward a step and said at a venture:

"I want ter see ther colonel! Tell him I've got good news for him!"

"Who are ye?" asked the picket, suspiciously. "I see you have a force of men behind ye. I'll call the guard!"

He blew a shrill whistle. It was answered from some distance in the wood.

In a moment the tramp of feet was heard, as the guard came rushing down.

"What's the matter, Bill?"

The picket held his musket ready still and made reply:

"I dunno! Hyar's a feller as wants to see the colonel!"

"Wants to see Jim, does he?" said the sergeant. "Who are ye?"

"I'm a Union scout," said Preston. "Come nearer an' I'll show ye my papers!"

Preston advanced until he was but a few yards from the guard. It was a critical moment.

"Mebbe ye are," said the sergeant, suspiciously. "But who are them chaps behind ye?"

"A detachment of Seymour's men. They got lost and I'm bringin' 'em in."

"Hold on! Don't ye come any nearer or ye'll git a bullet," cried the sergeant. "Turn up that lantern, Jerry, I want a look at this chap's face."

The lantern slide was pulled and the light flashed into Preston's face. The old scout had nothing about him that suggested the Confederate spy.

The sergeant seemed to be satisfied with Preston's appearance, but he raised the lantern and flashed it at Will and his men.

In an instant he saw their gray uniforms and a gasping yell escaped him:

"It's the Rebs, boys! Look out fer yerselves! Give the general alarm!"

But Will's firm voice rang out:

"Halt! the man who call out or moves a finger will be riddled with bullets."

The guns of the Grays covered the guard. For a moment there was silence. Then the sergeant said:

"We surrender, captain! What will ye do with us?"

"Take charge of them, Payton," said Will, turning to the corporal. "See that they don't escape. One moment, sergeant."

The Union sergeant stood sullenly before the young captain.

"Wall, what do ye want?"

"Who are you?"

"My name's Bill Baker!"

"What is your regiment?"

"Regiment?" the sergeant chuckled in a dry way. "Wall, you'll find out pretty quick. It ain't no regular regiment. We are mighty irregular!"

Like a flash the truth dawned upon Will. He gave a sharp cry.

"Oh, you are Kelley's men! Now I know you! I ought to hang you!"

"Ye kain't do that, captain. Ye've accepted our surrender!"

"Where is your leader, Kelley?" asked Will.

"Over thar in camp!" replied the guerilla, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "If ye git him, hang him."

"That will assuredly be his fate," said Will, grimly. Then he gave a start as he felt a touch on his arm. He saw the white, stern face of Sylvester Brown.

"Pardon me, captain. I hope I am not asking too much, but you know how deeply this concerns me. May I talk with this fellow?"

"You may!" said Will.

Brown faced the sergeant and said:

"Now, my man, I can't believe that you are utterly devoid of all good elements. You have somewhere in your being a bit of sentiment I know. I appeal to you to answer the question I shall put to you."

"That depends," said the guerilla, with a shrug of his shoulders. "I ain't so terrible bad, an' mebbe I ain't so very good, nuther. What do ye want?"

"I want you to tell me if your chief has not at present with him as a prisoner a certain young woman, the daughter of a farmer whose buildings he burned the other night?"

Brown seemed to transfix the fellow with his keen gaze. The sergeant blinked and shrugged his shoulders.

"What of it?" he growled. "She was the darter of a Confederate."

"Why does he keep her prisoner?"

"I reckon he expects some one will pay him a big ransom for her."

"Nonsense! Let us have the truth now."

"Well," said the sergeant, with a yawn, "if ye must have it—he's in love with the gal an' wants her to agree to marry him."

"The infernal scoundrel!" cried Brown. "He shall hang!"

"Wall, mebbe we all will."

"I have no doubt you all deserve it. Now, tell me, sir, where does he keep her imprisoned?"

The sergeant hesitated. This was a question which he was not in duty bound to answer, as he believed. He shook his head, and said:

"I dunno."

"Oh, yes, you do!" said Will, sternly. "Remember, if you don't tell the truth, we'll hang you like a murderer."

The fellow shivered. He hesitated a moment, and then said:

"Wall, I ain't no ways sure. But I reckon he left her at Floyd's."

"Where is that?"

"There's a nigger family named Floyd down hyer a ways. Ther old mammy, Agnes, was ther family nurse for ther Cravens. The gal is likely down thar."

"Oh, she's not here?"

"No, she ain't with the company. Kelley never takes any of the fair sex with him."

"Can you guide us to Floyd's?"

"Oh, yes! I could go to ther place in my sleep. But I'm a prisoner, ye know."

"If you conduct yourself properly it will be a good way to get an amelioration of your offences," said Sylvester Brown. "In other words you may save your neck. Do you understand?"

"I do," said Sergeant Bill Baker. "I'm no fool! I accept yer terms. I'll guide ye to Floyd's house an' do all I kin to git the gal fer ye. But ye're to give me my freedom arterwards."

"We will release you on parole," said Will.

"Thet's a bargain. To tell ye the truth, I'm sick of living this kind of a life. I'm ready to break away from Cool Jim. He don't give me a fair show!"

Will and Brown now conferred.

"What shall we do?" said Brown. "I don't want to interfere with any plan of attack you may have upon Kelley and his gang. But I'd like to go at once to the rescue of Miss Craven."

"You shall go," cried Will. "You need not remain here to take part with us in the attack. I will detail four men to accompany you. If you find Miss Craven you may report to me here afterwards, or if you do not find me, go back to the camp of our main army on the other branch of the Beaver Dam Creek."

"That is very good of you, Captain Prentiss," cried Brown, with great joy. "I will take Sergeant Baker with me."

"Very good."

So, while the Grays were preparing for the surprise attack, Brown, with four picked men and Baker as a guide, was on his way to Floyd's.

Will knew that the camp of the Union guerillas could not be far away. He had captured their most advanced picket and guard. All that was necessary now was to advance as far as possible upon the camp until discovered, and then rush it.

Though the guerillas had ten times their number, Will believed that in the confusion and suddenness of the attack he could deal them a blow which they would feel seriously, even if he did not defeat and scatter them.

So, as soon as Brown and his men departed with Baker to find the Floyd cabin, Will ordered the Grays forward.

Somewhat strangely, Kelley had failed to post a continuous line of pickets. He doubtless considered himself safe from attack, as being in the rear of Seymour's forces.

It was a daring thing which Will was attempting.

He knew that the fight might bring some of the Union regiments nearby to the scene, in which case he would be hemmed in.

But the guerillas were, like Carlton, a stumbling block in his path. He could not hope to reach the supply train unless they were disposed of.

Moreover, he was anxious to dispose of Kelley and his gang effectually, if possible. So the Grays were ordered forward.

And they went through the trees on the double-quick.

In a few moments the lights of the camp-fires were visible. Then a yell went up, a shot was fired and the alarm quickly given.

"Forward, Grays!" shouted Will. "Give it to them!"

Everywhere the guerillas could be seen rushing to arms. What followed was thrilling indeed.

An attack by night is, however, never a great success. In the confusion of darkness there can be no concert of action. The Grays descended upon the guerilla camp like a thunderbolt.

But the guerillas fell back, even beyond the camp-fires. Of course they were in confusion, and had it been daylight, the Grays might have riddled them with their rapid volleys.

But in the darkness and the cover of the trees, the guerillas were able to escape many of the shots, and they were given time to rally and reform.

They began to return the fire. It soon became hot, and Will saw that he would lose some of his men if he did not get out of the light of the camp-fires.

So he gave orders for them to be scattered and also to destroy the shelter tents of the guerillas. While a line of the Grays was answering the fire of the foe another line was engaged in doing this.

The tents were pulled down and the camp-effects thrown upon the fires. An effort was made to stampede the horses.

But now the guerillas had quite recovered themselves and were organized for the defence. They began to press forward, and Will speedily found that it was policy for him to fall back.

So he did so. Steadily the Grays dropped back, until once more outside the line of the fires.

Then for a long time firing ensued between the Grays and the guerillas. Thus matters stood, when Fred Randolph came up to Will excitedly, and said:

"We are lost. There is a force moving up on our right flank. The guerillas are massed on our left. We are between two hostile forces."

CHAPTER V.

BAFFLING INCIDENTS.

Will was staggered by this assertion of the young lieutenant. He saw at once that he must retreat hurriedly or it would be too late.

So he gave the word quickly. The Grays fell back rapidly until they reached the verge of the woods. It soon became evident that they were faced by a tremendous force.

To stand their ground was not advisable. Will saw that this encounter with the foe was most ill-advised. He had not sufficient force to hold them back.

But while the darkness interfered with his movements, it also was against the foe. In fact it was the darkness which now aided the Grays in this tight squeeze.

Will was not slow to decide upon his plan of action.

He knew that it would be madness to try to cut his way through the Union regulars on his right flank.

The guerillas were coming around on his left. Only a small guard of them was now in front.

Will adopted a plan, which, while it had its risks, was nevertheless bound to be a success if properly executed. This was to swing his line around at right angles and make a dash through the ground lately occupied by Kelley and his men.

The risk of this was the breaking of his line in the face of the enemy. A quick charge by the regulars might throw his men into confusion and utter rout.

In daylight Will would not have dared to perform this evolution, for the foe would certainly have seen and then taken advantage of the opportunity.

But in the darkness the move could not be seen.

The order went quickly from lieutenants to corporals and the Grays swung about. Before the Union troops could realize it they felt a galling fire on their flank and realized that there was no foe in their front.

Will now had extricated himself from the trap. The guerillas came into contact with the regulars' left and for some moments there was a mixup, in which shots were exchanged and many lives lost.

By the time matters had been explained by the guerilla chief and an understanding was reached, the Grays had fallen back several hundred yards and had actually reached a branch of the Mechanicsville road.

Far ahead in the darkness could be seen moving lights.

In an instant Will and Fred Randolph knew what this meant.

The Union supply train had come up and was passing on its way to Seymour's camp. The force of regulars which the Grays had just come in contact with was doubtless a guard which accompanied the train.

The quick wit of Will Prentiss took in the whole situation.

"Great Cæsar!" he cried. "Do you see that, Fred? The supply train is over yonder. Its guard is behind us."

"Hurrah!" cried the young lieutenant. "Could anything be better? Let's go over and attack it."

"Oh, if we only had horses."

"Pshaw! that don't count! We can get out all right. We can turn that wagon train into a pile of ashes in no time."

"But what will it avail if we are cornered in the deal?" said Will.

"Do you notice a peculiar fact?"

"What?"

"The wagon train has halted. It looks as if they were rounding up for a camp."

"That is true!"

Will did not know then what he learned afterwards, that the left wing of Seymour's line had been driven in by Longstreet's skirmishers and that orders had been sent to the supply train to wait where it was to avoid being captured.

Afar off in the southeast Will and Fred had heard the sound of musketry, but they had no idea what it meant. They did not know that it was the prelude to the great battle of the following day.

Had the boy captain known this he could have seized the opportunity to strike a blow that night that might have resulted in a great Confederate victory.

Although he had but a small company at his command, it was nevertheless a sufficient force to destroy Seymour's supply train. The destruction of this would have compelled the left wing of the Union army to fall back the next morning.

In which event the battle of Mechanicsville might have resulted far differently. But these were the chances of war.

The Grays thus far had played in hard luck.

They had been held at bay and baffled at every turn. It did seem as if there should be a change soon.

But here was the coveted goal of their desires.

The rich supply train was before them. With a swift dash it might be captured and destroyed.

But Will was not a reckless youth. While it was his custom to act with decision, he could not accept chances which might result in desperate defeat.

He knew that he must get back to his camp before Carlton by daybreak. Else he would be caught like a rat in a trap between Carlton and the heavy guard of the supply train.

Daylight would reveal his position and every movement. But the temptation to attack the supply train was most powerful.

Lieutenant Randolph was eager.

"What are we waiting for, Will?" he cried. "There is the train. Why do we not attack?"

Will shrugged his shoulders.

"Are you blind?" he asked.

"Blind?"

"Yes!"

"What do you mean?"

"We cannot attack under present conditions. You see we are in a bad position at best. We have only escaped annihilation by the greatest of good luck."

"But—the foe are behind us. We can make a quick dash and fire and blow up that train before they can interfere."

"And what will we do after that?"

Fred paused. He saw the point.

"Ah!" he said, "they would hold us then on all sides. Confound it! It looks as if we are bound to be baffled on every hand, Will!"

"So it does, Fred. The game is right in our hands, yet we must let it go."

"If we had horses—"

"That is it! If we were mounted we could make a dash and get out before the foe could reach us."

"It is a pity."

"So it is."

"Can we not capture mounts with the wagon train?"

Will had thought of this. But he knew the wagon horses would be of little use for cavalry purposes. Whether there was a troop of fresh horses for cavalry use in the train he did not know.

Just then Joe Preston the scout came up in the darkness.

"Captain," he said, with a salute, "what is the order? Are we to remain here long?"

Will gave a start. He saw the force of this point. He said, quickly:

"No! It is fatal to remain in one spot. Give the order to fall back."

Slowly the Grays retired in the darkness. They were soon far down the highway and on their return to their original camp.

It seemed too bad to retire thus when the object of their quest was right in their hands.

But there was no help for it. The Grays were baffled in their best plans.

Preston the scout now took the lead, and by the most clever of work, led the little company through lanes and sunken roads until the enemy were far behind. He called a halt two hours later, and said:

"Captain Prentiss, do ye see yonder ridge against the sky?"

Will saw the long, black line against the night sky. He made reply:

"Yes, I see it."

"Well, if you were to climb that, just on the other side you would see the lights of Carlton's camp."

Will was astonished. A daring idea came to him.

"Preston," he said, "are we not then in the rear of Carlton?"

"Yes," replied the scout.

"How would it do to make a rear attack and descend upon him in the darkness? With a sudden dash could we not scatter his lines enough to break through?"

"To break through?" said the scout, with surprise. He looked sharply at Will. "Do you mean that, Captain?"

"I certainly do."

The scout was silent a moment. He seemed to be doing some deep thinking. Finally he said:

"If ye had five hundred men ye could do that an' eat Carlton up."

"What is the matter with our present force? In the darkness he could not suspect our numbers."

"That's all right," said the scout. "But if he should make a turn on ye and hold his ground ye'd be done for. Remember, ye'd have to make a clean cut through his line."

"That is right," agreed Will, "but I believe it can be done. Nothing venture, nothing win. If we can surprise him and cut through to our own camp we shall demoralize him."

"All right," assented the scout. "If ye try it, I wish ye luck."

Will had made up his mind to try this daring plan. He called Fred, to whom he imparted his plan.

The young lieutenant was instantly enthusiastic.

"I believe it can be done," said he. "You may be sure the Grays will not flinch."

"I believe you," said Will. "Form them in line of battle for the advance. We must lose no time."

At once the daring project of the young captain of the Grays was prepared for. It was communicated to the boys by their officers, and it need only be said that they were enthusiastic.

"Where our captain leads we will follow," they cried.

Will was at once in the lead, and rapidly now they pushed on up over the ridge.

In a short while they had almost gained its summit. From the side of the eminence in daylight a view of the country could be had for a wide distance.

Now, however, at night only distant camp-fires could be seen, gleaming in the darkness.

Far up to the north there were flashes of light and the sounds of cannon.

"It is a night attack on Seymour's left," said Preston. "Now we are near Carlton's picket line. Look out!"

A bullet cut the rim of Will's cap.

CHAPTER VI.

CUTTING THEIR WAY THROUGH.

The bullet had been fired by the picket, who had not even given his hail, but fired once he saw the attacking line.

"Forward," shouted Will Prentiss, flourishing his sword. "Forward, Grays, and cut them down! For the South and the Confederacy!"

With a wild cheer the Grays topped the rise and went charging down the opposite side.

The camp-fires of Carlton's men were plainly seen. The Union soldiers were springing up and grasping their muskets from the stack.

"Now is the time!" shouted Fred Randolph. "Don't let them form, boys! Give it to them!"

Quick volleys the little company of Grays poured in and scattered the Union line like chaff.

The next moment they were right in the midst of the camp. A formidable appearance they made. A line of bristling steel coming down in the firelight.

It was a sight to turn the courage of even the most hardened veteran.

They could not be blamed for scattering right and left in the direst confusion. The Grays went through the line like a thunderbolt.

Will Prentiss did not commit the mistake of trying to remain and annihilate the regiment of foes right then and there.

He knew that on either flank companies were forming rapidly and they would close in and envelop him.

It was enough to have driven the Union soldiers back. The Grays were seeking only to gain their own camp.

As they passed through the line like a thunderbolt they kept straight on. The Union soldiers formed in the darkness, strictly on the defensive.

Before they could make any sort of a fight the Confederate boys were gone. The Grays went on down into the highway, straight for the bridge where the sentry had been shot the day before.

Wild cheers of triumph pealed from their lips. They formed again in the cut below, and Fred Randolph cried:

"We're through, boys! We've hardly lost a man! Hurrah for the Confederacy!"

The cheers were given with a will.

The successful dash partly made up for the baffling experiences of the night. In a few moments the hail of a picket was heard:

"Who goes there?"

"Friends!" shouted Will.

"Advance with the countersign!"

"A fair field and no favor!"

"Pass in, friend! Hello! Great Cæsar! It is our comrades back again!"

The picket shouted the news in wildest joy. In a few moments all were in camp safe and sound. The reunion was a joyous one.

Joe Spotswood had little to report.

"We kept keenly on the watch," he said, "but we saw nothing of the foe. They kept their distance and we kept ours. I knew something was up when I heard the firing just now."

"Well, you can bet something was up!" cried Fred. "We came right down through their camp."

"The deuce!" exclaimed Joe. "I did not look for you back so soon."

"No, we did not expect to get back before daylight, and once it looked as if we would not get back at all," said Will.

"We have pulled out of a very tight scrape."

"I should say so!" rejoined Fred. "And we were baffled at that!"

With this they detailed their experiences. Joe listened with interest.

"The big battle will come off to-morrow," he said. "I am afraid we will not be in it."

"Too bad!" declared Fred. "But we must obey orders. I'm in favor of another attempt to get that wagon train."

"That we will have to consider in the morning, when we find out how we stand," said Will.

Just then shots were heard on the ridge. The picket came rushing in.

"We are attacked," he cried.

Investigation quickly proved this to be a fact. The regiment under Carlton was coming down for reprisal.

Will, however, did not betray alarm. He quickly formed his men again in line of battle and awaited the attack.

The Union line came down to within fifty yards of the Grays' camp. Then it made a quick retreat.

It did not come again. The same characteristic work of the slow Carlton was made manifest.

He began at once to throw up intrenchments by torchlight. It was plain that he fancied the Grays were much larger in force than they were.

At this Will and Fred laughed.

"If he knew the truth," said the young lieutenant, "he could sweep us off the earth at one drive."

"It is a good thing for us that he doesn't," said the boy captain. "Just before daylight we will leave our campfires burning and draw out."

"Draw out?"

"Yes! Daylight will reveal our condition to him and he will be sure to overwhelm us."

Fred saw that his young captain was right. So he did not demur.

Altogether the Grays had not great cause for disappointment. They had failed in their project to capture the supply train as Longstreet had directed.

But, on the other hand, they had made a daring dash through the enemy's lines. They had confused them and committed much damage, besides capturing the picket guard of Kelley's guerillas.

This brought the subject of Sylvester Brown's enterprise to Will's mind. He mentioned the matter to Preston.

"We could do nothing about that jest now," said the scout, "but it's quite likely that the young feller found his gal all safe."

As Preston had said, little could be done in the matter as yet. There was too much else of a dangerously pressing nature to engross their attention.

It lacked now hardly an hour of daylight. Will had given all orders to silently break camp and steal out in that dark hour just before the dawn.

It did not take the Grays long to make preparations, when down the roadway came the clatter of hoofs. The picket halted a lone rider.

Will happened to be near the picket and heard the challenge:

"Who goes there?"

"I am one of General Longstreet's orderlies," was the reply. "I bring orders from the General for Captain Prentiss."

"Let him pass, picket," cried Will. The orderly rode in and dismounted. He saluted the young captain.

"Captain Prentiss?"

"Yes!"

"Orders from General Longstreet!"

He handed Will a paper. The young captain took it quickly and read it:

"To Captain Prentiss of the Virginia Grays:—

"I send this by an orderly and I do not know that it will reach you in time. But if you get it before six o'clock a. m., fall back to the creek and march north to join the regiment of Colonel Joe English and you will participate in to-morrow's battle. I assume that you did not reach Seymour's supply train, but you have doubtless accomplished sufficient in holding the train back. I wish you good success.

"Signed: LONGSTREET."

Will read the dispatch carefully and then nodded slowly.

"All right, orderly," he said. "You are going back to report to General Longstreet?"

"I am, captain."

"Kindly give him a note from me!"

Will wrote on the back of the despatch:

"To General Longstreet:—

"We have been long held at bay by a regiment under Carlton. We, by a ruse, gained his rear and almost got Seymour's supply train. We were baffled by Cool Kelley's guerillas. We captured his picket guard and rushed his camp. But the supply train guard was too powerful for us and forced us to fall back. Caught between them and Carlton we rushed Carlton's camp and cut our way through, back to our own camp. Your orders shall be instantly obeyed. It is the earnest wish of the Grays to participate in the fight to-morrow at Mechanicsville, where we hope and believe the Confederate arms will triumph.

"Your obed't servant,

"WILL PRENTISS,

"Captain Virginia Grays."

The orderly rode away. Will now with new spirit went back to the camp-fires. He told Fred quickly of the new order, and said:

"Call the men into line at once. We must fall back to the creek within the hour. To-morrow we must win fame in new achievements."

The report electrified the Grays. They were quickly in line and ready to march. They practised every possible ruse to deceive Carlton as to their intentions.

Camp-fires were left burning. Effigies of soldiers sitting about them were left, and it proved that Carlton's scouts were deceived until daylight revealed the deception.

By that time the Grays were far on their way up the creek. They pushed on at a rapid pace, skirting Seymour's whole front until, an hour after sunrise, the advance guard sent up a shout:

"There's our boys! There's our comrades! Hurrah!"

Colonel English's regiment was seen bivouacked at a fordway. The picket guard of course halted the Grays.

But Colonel English dashed down himself and throwing himself from his horse, clasped Will's hand.

"Well, I am glad to see you, Prentiss," he cried. "This is a great pleasure. Are you ready to join us in to-day's work?"

"We were never more eager for battle," cried Will. "Ask my boys!"

In a few moments the Grays were in line in the crack Richmond regiment, whose work for the Confederate cause is recorded in history as of the bravest.

The regiment was bivouacked at the ford waiting orders. It was not known at what point the general attack was to be made.

But it was presumed that Stonewall Jackson would assail the Union army on its right, while Hill and Longstreet attacked its left.

All the morning the regiment remained awaiting orders. They came just before noon from Longstreet:

"Advance slowly! Wait for reinforcements later."

Colonel English was a bit puzzled by this order. But he obeyed it.

The regiment advanced slowly in the face of Seymour's columns. Of course Colonel English knew that he alone could not hope to give battle to the Union line.

At the same time he hesitated about venturing too far from the creek, for fear of being cut off by cavalry. But still he moved slowly on and awaited developments.

CHAPTER VII.

THE REPULSE.

It was known afterwards that the reason for all this delay in the attack was the non-arrival of A. P. Hill's division.

In the meantime, though, some adventures of interest befell the Grays.

As they advanced with the rest of the regiment the scout Preston came up and said to Will:

"Down yonder in the holler to the right is the home of Floyd, where it is believed that the gal Kelley abducted was taken."

Will gave a powerful start.

"Is that true?"

"I reckon it is."

"Well," said the young captain, "I have some curiosity to know if Sylvester Brown rescued her, and what became of our boys who went with him."

"So hev I. As they don't seem to be much chance of movin' on right away, let's go down thar and see about it."

"We will do it!"

Will reported to Colonel English and then joined Joe. They left the ranks and, passing the guards, went on down into the hollow.

It was a tramp of half a mile. When they came in sight of the cabin, both gave a start.

It had a deserted appearance. As they drew nearer they saw with surprise that there were marks of a desperate fight.

The windows had been shot out, the door was filled with bullet holes. Blood bespattered the jamb and streaked the floor.

Everything was upside down in the hovel, for such it was. Will and Preston looked all through the house.

The furniture was of a cheap pattern and badly smashed. Some cloth from a gown which might have belonged to Harriet Craven was found, also a handkerchief bearing her initials.

But no sign of living being was about the place.

"What do you make of it?" asked Will.

The scout scratched his head.

"It looks dubious," he said. "It seems to me as if there had been a guard left here with the gal, an' Brown an' his boys had a hard tussle with 'em."

"That is just it. But where are they? Who was the victor?"

The scout shrugged his shoulders.

"That's the question! You've got me, as ther grasshopper said to the hen. If I wuz to guess, I should say Sylvester cleaned 'em out an' got the gal."

"I hope so! Oh! What's that?"

Will gave a start. They had emerged from the house, and the young captain had chanced to glance across the rear yard of the domicile.

There was a mound of freshly turned earth. At its head was a slab of wood, and nailed to this a board. On the board was an inscription.

With a weird sense of horror, Will and the scout approached the ghastly emblem of a tragedy. The explanation was on the headboard of the grave.

The inscription was traced rudely by a bloody finger, and read:

"Heer lyes ther bones an' carkisses of four Confedrit soldiers, an' their souls are climbin' ther golden stairs to glory. So rest all fools who try to beat the only Cool Kelley in his little game of bluff. Pease to thare ashes."

Aghast, Will and Preston stared at the explanative headboard. It filled them with horror unspeakable.

"Can it be true?" gasped the young captain. "Can Sylvester Brown have been killed? Also our three brave boys? This is horrible!"

"It seems to be true," said Preston. "Ye will have better reason than ever to hunt down thet cuss."

"Hunt him down!" gritted Will. "I'll spend my life doing it! I'll never rest until I see him on the scaffold!"

"Good fer you, boy! I'm with ye. I'd like to see him stretch hemp."

Will shivered, and rejoined:

"But the girl—what of her?"

"It's awful to think of."

They turned slowly now and walked away. Will Prentiss was pale and stern.

As they approached the Confederate lines, they met

Colonel English. That excellent officer was regarding them curiously.

"What do you find of interest, gentlemen, down in that negro cabin?" he asked.

"The record of a dark crime is there," said Will, "and it is to be charged to Cool Kelley, the guerilla!"

Colonel English gave a start.

"To Kelley, eh!" he exclaimed. "He is the greatest fiend in either army. The first time I get my grip on him he will stretch hemp."

"That is my sentiment!" cried Will, "but it does not look easy to get him."

"But what is the crime?"

With this Will told the story of Kelley's fiendish work. Colonel English listened with utter horror.

"That is awful," he said. "It is too bad we are going into battle, else I would enjoy organizing a hunt for him and his crew."

"If we emerge from the battle alive," said Will, "let us register a vow to hunt him down."

"Very good; it shall be done!"

Time seemed to drag wearily to the Grays until finally the order came again to move forward. They were now within sight of the enemy's position.

The Union pickets had fallen back and cannon bristled from a hillside. Colonel English looked anxiously back over his shoulder.

Then he gave a great cry of joy.

Down through the scrub growth long gray lines were seen. Their glittering bayonets flashed in the afternoon air.

At last A. P. Hill had arrived with his division, and the attack was to be made. Colonel English had no longer any fear of a rear attack.

At once the line advanced.

There were scattering shots all along the lines. These soon swelled, and the ominous feeling of war was in the air.

Finally, far up to the north a shell went soaring up into the sky. It exploded, and was followed by another and another.

Then the whole gray line rushed forward with wild hurrahs. It was hard to describe the scene that followed.

The battle of Mechanicsville will always be remembered as desperate and fierce and bloody. It proved a disaster to the Confederate arms.

But this should not detract from the fame and honor of the brave men in gray, who went again and again to the cannon's mouth, hurling themselves into every breach, only to give up their lives in a vain effort for victory.

The Union position was a powerful one. It was impossible to dislodge them, and Longstreet in vain shattered his regiments against their line.

It was expected that the brave Stonewall Jackson would attack the Union right, when the story might have been different.

But Jackson did not appear for some reason or other, and it was no doubt owing to that fact that the day was lost.

Repulse followed repulse, and when night came the ex-

hausted Confederates retired to await the fortunes of another day.

History records how the next morning they awoke to a great surprise. In the night, by General McClellan's orders, the Union forces retired.

So that the Confederate army marched into the empty intrenchments, and all were disappointed beyond measure at the result of the day.

The action of McClellan in this surprising withdrawal after a great victory has never been explained. A theory has been advanced that he foresaw the arrival of overwhelming reinforcements, which would turn the day against them.

In any event it is known that the Union army retreated from the field of Mechanicsville and fell back hastily to a position at Gaines' Mill.

During the battle the Virginia Grays distinguished themselves repeatedly. Will Prentiss led them once in a charge right up to the enemy's guns.

If the Grays had been supported then they would have turned the tide of battle for the whole day.

But, unfortunately, they were pressed back by superior numbers, and with no support they were obliged to retire.

The Grays lost twenty men in dead and wounded. It sadly depleted their ranks, and Will saw that they must be recruited before going further.

This would be easy, however, for Will had over a hundred of Richmond youths on the waiting list. He had only to send for them.

The battle of Mechanicsville was fought on the 26th day of June, 1862, and was the first of the famous Seven Days' battles.

It was a matter of much disappointment and great chagrin to the Union soldiers to be obliged to retire after having won a signal victory.

But to the Grays it seemed to be just as it should be.

They were in high spirits now, and the cry went up:

"We have scared them so that they are running for Washington!"

In a certain sense this was true. The Union troops were, of course, not scared, but for many politic reasons their generals thought best to withdraw to the capital and abandon the campaign.

All that afternoon at Mechanicsville the Grays had fought nobly. When night came, however, it did not bring rest for them.

The two armies lay sullenly facing each other.

The last gun had been fired, and as by mutual consent silence reigned upon the battle-field. The opposing pickets were within hailing distance of each other.

The Grays were reclining about their camp-fires, just getting recuperated, when an orderly appeared:

"Is Captain Prentiss here?"

"I am Captain Prentiss," said Will.

"General Longstreet sends his compliments and would like to see you in his tent at once."

"Very good!" replied Will. "Return my compliments and say I will respond at once."

"All right, captain!"

Will hurriedly prepared to visit his commanding officer. He donned his coat and buckled on his sword.

In due time he entered the tent of the Confederate General. The latter greeted him warmly.

"I am glad to see you, Prentiss," he said. "I had my eye on your command to-day and I know you fought admirably. You are entitled to great credit."

"It is pleasant to have you say that," replied Will, "although we achieved but little."

"That was no fault of yours. It was a hard day. We shall have better success in our next fight."

"You will pursue the enemy?"

"Most certainly, to the last ditch," was the reply.

CHAPTER VIII.

CAPTURING AN OUTPOST.

"I hope victory will reward us next," said Will.

"You may be sure it will, my boy. Now, I want to ask of you a great favor."

"What is it?"

"Below here, on the Chickahominy, there is an outpost of the Union Army. It is so situated that the men located there can study our position with field glasses and report our every movement by wire to their generals."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Will, in surprise. "It must be on high land!"

"It is."

"Very good! You want me to go down there and capture it?"

"I do."

"When?"

"This very night. Under cover of darkness you can surely do it. When you have accomplished your purpose return to me at once. I may put you in to-morrow's fight as well."

"Very good, General Longstreet. But don't forget one fact."

"What is that?"

"My men are pretty well exhausted. They must have sleep and rest."

"I'll see that they have it. It ought not to take more than two hours to dispose of this job. I could select some other company, but none that I could feel so sure would carry out the task."

"We will do our best, General Longstreet. Who has the command of this outpost?"

"Colonel Jerry Ward, of some New York regiment. He has fifty men with him, so you will have your hands full. They have erected a small signal tower there, from which they use the heliograph. Now I want you to capture that post."

"I will do it, or we will not return," said Will.

"Very good! It is possible that the Union forces may

draw back so far that they will have to abandon the place. But I doubt it."

"To make sure of it, you believe it is the best thing to attack."

"I do."

"Are these all the instructions you have for me?"

"Yes."

"Very good! I wish you good-night. I will report at as early an hour as possible."

"Very well!"

Will took his leave at once. In a few moments he was back with his fellow soldiers.

Fred Randolph, who had half guessed what was wanted, greeted him at once:

"Hello, captain! What is up now?"

"A night job for us," said Will. "Call the men to arms."

"The deuce! They won't be pleased to hear that. Everybody is tired after to-day's hard task."

"I know, but duty is duty. Get ready for a quick march."

The order was one that must be obeyed. In a few moments the surprised Grays, called from the comfort of their camp-fires, were under arms.

There was some grumbling, but Will stepped out and addressed them:

"It must never be said that the Virginia Grays have shirked their duty," he said, in ringing tones. "To-day they have won fame and glory on the battle field. To-night we are honored by our commander by his intrusting us with one of the most important of missions. We are delegated to attack and capture an important Union outpost near the banks of the Chickahominy. If we succeed we shall gain great credit. Two hours should accomplish the whole thing. Then we can return and make up for our loss of sleep."

His words seemed to inspire the Grays. They gave a ringing cheer.

"Fall in! March!"

Away they went into the night. Soon they were beyond the Confederate lines. It was Preston the scout who again acted as guide.

"I know ther outpost well," he said. "I reckon I kin take ye right to it."

"It is curious that it should be defended by such a small force," said Will. "How does that happen?"

"The place is on a hill and far back in the woods. Its presence would hardly be suspected, unless one stumbled right upon it."

"Oh! I see! They depend for safety upon that fact?"

"Yes; but ye won't have much on 'em with yer company so reduced."

"That is right," said Will. "We are twenty brave fellows short. But we will meet them at that."

"I think so, too."

The night was as dark as a pocket. Only for the unerring skill of the guide the boys would have gone astray.

He kept them on the right path until near midnight he whispered:

"Ther Chickahominy is right over yender. Do you see thet high rise over thar?"

"Yes."

"Wall, that's ther watch tower ye see over the trees. We are close on 'em now."

Will hesitated a moment.

"I hope they won't get the alarm and flee," he said.

"No danger of that," declared the enthusiastic old scout. "They will never see us until we get very close. We shall be fools if they slip us."

"All right," said Will, with a deep breath. "Let us surround the place."

But Preston put his hand up.

"Don't precipitate matters," he said. "Ye'll get all the trouble ye want if ye keep on. It will come without ther askin'. Jest keep cool!"

"All right!" agreed the boy captain. "We have come here to capture the watch tower. What method do you propose?"

The scout reflected a moment.

"If ye make an attack," he said, "they'll fight. They've good defense and they will give us lots of trouble."

"I suppose so."

"Well, I'll tell ye what I think is the best way. Just a little strategy."

"Strategy?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll have to defer to you. Probably we could give the enemy a long chase into the country. But that means the sacrifice of life to drive them out of here. That is by no means easy."

"But it must be done," said Fred.

"Yes!" agreed the old scout, "but we kin trick them. Jest leave it to me."

"We are willing to do that," said Will, "but we'd like to know your plan."

"You shall," agreed the scout. "Jest line your men up here. I'll go up and run into their picket guard. I'll pretend to be Stevens, McClellan's boss scout. He and I look enough alike to be brothers. I'll git in and make up a cock and bull story of some sort about McClellan's retreat and that he orders them to abandon the place at once. I'll tell them a thousand Confederates are marchin' down hyar to surround 'em and they must git out at once post haste."

"You will draw up nearer and drive in their picket on the other side, see? I will pretend to lead them out to safety on this side and right into your hands. They will believe you have overpowering numbers and they won't fight."

"Capital!" cried Will. "You are a genius, Joe Preston! That is a bloodless way to capture the post!"

"I believe it!"

"All right! Go ahead, Preston, and count on us. We'll back you up in anything you do."

"Very well, captain! Now, in jest twenty minutes send a couple of men around an' fire on the picket on the other side. Make quite a stir around thar."

"All right."

With that the old scout slipped away into the gloom.

Time passed, and when the twenty minutes had elapsed, Will, as directed by Preston, sent a guard around to drive in the picket on that side.

They did so with ease. The alarm was given at the outpost, and there was much excitement. Loud orders and the rattle of arms were heard.

Then an astonishing thing happened.

There was a great flash and a mighty boom. A great shell came tearing down the hillside and burst fifty yards below.

"Great guns!" cried Fred Randolph, "they have artillery! Do you suppose there's a mistake? Why don't Preston show up?"

Again the cannon's thunder shook the ground. Fortunately, though, the depression could not be made sufficiently to hit the spot where the Grays were lined up.

Time passed, and the outpost defenders hurled shells into the ravine. They did no harm beyond shattering trees and ploughing up the ground.

But Will could hold out no longer.

Preston had failed to carry out his plan. The fifty defenders of the post did not march out to be captured.

The scout did not return.

Had his plan miscarried? Had the foe penetrated his identity and captured him?

If so, his fate was sealed. He would be executed as a spy.

Will felt sorry for the faithful old scout, who had served the Southern cause well. This fact in itself seemed to furnish the incentive for an attack.

So, acting on a final impulse, Will gave the word.

"Come, Grays! We're going into their camp! Let every man be ready for business!"

The Grays quickly sprung forward. The next moment they were upon the summit of the ridge or hill and making for the earthworks of the outpost.

The cannon spoke again, and a shell passed over their heads. The Union soldiers could be seen trying to depress the gun. The next shot would sweep many of the Grays out of existence.

But that shot was never fired. With a wild cheer the Grays rushed upon the gunners and bayoneted them. A tough hand to hand fight followed.

Twice the Grays were hurled back, but only to return to the fray. Finally the officer in command threw down his sword, and cried, in despair:

"We surrender!"

How the Grays cheered. They had won the victory and captured the outpost. The object of their expedition was gained.

In a few moments they had taken possession of the place. Half a hundred Union prisoners were marched out and placed under guard.

When the defenders of the outpost learned how small a force had forced them to surrender they were chagrined.

But their colonel, Joe Ward, said:

"It's all right! We ought to have had more men. With

a whole regiment here to defend the place we could have laughed at five times that number!"

Will at once inquired for Preston the scout. It was some time before he was found.

He had been confined in a room of the observation tower, which was a rough structure of logs and boards. It is needless to say that the old scout was pleased with his release.

"Wall, ye did well," he cried. "They had artillery to help 'em, and in spite of that ye whipped 'em!"

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE HANDS OF THE GUERRILLAS.

"Of course we did," said Will. "That is what we came here for. Now we can destroy this place and go back and report favorably to Longstreet."

"All right! Let us do that at once."

The scout was soon himself. When he had been promptly recognized and placed under guard by the Union colonel his confidence had oozed. He was now, however, much encouraged.

"It's a good job," he said. "Ye did well, boy. I kin tell ye thet Longstreet will be pleased!"

"I hope he will!"

"I know durned well he will. But I hev somethin' to say to you!"

"Well," said Will, quietly, "what have you to say?"

"Ye would give all yer old shoes to meet Cool Jim Kelley and round him up?"

"Yes," agreed Will. "He is a dangerous character and should be taken care of."

"I believe you! Well, now, after we leave this place let us take a march over to the Wolf's Den. I believe we will find some trace of the gang over there. It is a lonely, unfrequented place, and just such a place as Kelley would creep into when he wants to recuperate."

"Do you think he needs recuperation?"

The scout laughed.

"I daresay not," he replied, "but Kelley is a moderate fellow and not given to haste. It is hard to tell."

"I have a presentiment that we will find him at the Wolf's Den myself," said Will. "If I am right that is a deep hollow among high hills over yonder towards the Union left."

"Yas, thet's right!"

"It seems odd that the Yankees haven't taken possession of it, for its steep heights are capital for defence."

The scout wagged his head.

"Don't ye be too sure but that they have done so already," he said. "We will need to go slow."

"You think Kelley is badly used up after his experience last night with the Union regulars?"

"He ought to be. When he got out of that squeeze they fired into each other by mistake and, as near as I can hear, Kelley lost a good many of his men."

Will set his lips tightly.

"All right!" he said, "let us lay for that dark scoundrel. The fate of Sylvester Brown and our boys should be avenged."

So arrangements were made to visit the locality known as the Wolf's Den. The prisoners captured were filed out under guard.

The outpost was then fired.

While the flames mounted skyward the Grays marched away. In a short time they were upon a road leading to the hills of the Den.

When within half a mile of these hills a halt was called.

"Now," said the scout, "it is better for you to wait here for a while and let me go ahead and do a little scouting. I will return soon."

"Wait a moment," cried Will.

"What?"

"I am going with you!"

The scout looked dubious.

"It's hardly safe," he said. "If I get captured, well and good. But the captain of the Grays must not throw his life away."

"The life of the captain of the Grays is no more valuable than yours, Preston," said Will. "If you do not object, I would like to accompany you."

"Certainly ye may. I'm only too glad of yer company."

Will at once gave instructions to his young lieutenant, and then with Preston left the company in Fred's charge.

The two plunged into the darkness.

They took a route right across the fields and through the timber. Soon they began to climb high ground.

The hills loomed up before them. As they ascended, however, these opened with deep cuts and precipitous ravines.

Preston led the way silently and with all the precision and light step of an Indian trailer.

Will had all he could do to keep up with the scout. But after a time they reached a point from which they could look over into the Den.

This was a deep pocket or valley in the hills.

Down deep in the darkness a light twinkled. It was a camp-fire.

Even at that distance the two could see that the figures of men were grouped about it. Preston led the way around an angle of the cliff which shut out further view.

And this now brought into view other camp-fires. It was beyond doubt the encampment of the guerillas.

"There ye are," said the scout, reflectively. "I believe it's Kelley and his men."

"So do I," said Will, eagerly. "But—how shall we get at them?"

"That's the question. They are certainly a good ways off. To git the Grays down thar to surround 'em ain't goin' to be an easy job, as I make it."

"That is true!" agreed the boy captain. "And yet—it must be done!"

"Not to-night, my friends! Your little jig is up!"

A mocking voice in their rear caused Will and the scout to turn. But they looked into the muzzles of muskets and saw the dark figures of armed men behind them.

"Great Jericho!" gasped the scout. "It's all up, boy! They've got us!"

A harsh laugh greeted this exclamation.

"Yas, it's all up with ye," said the same voice. "Goin' to lay out Kelley, are ye? Well, ye'll have to git up a little earlier to do it!"

"Who are you?" asked Will, coolly. "What right have you to interfere with us?"

"What right?" A scornful laugh followed. "Well, ye'll find out quick enough. Pull together a leetle brush thar, Smith. We'll have a leetle firelight to hang these fellers by."

Will, as well as Preston, saw the futility of resistance.

They were captured by a detachment of the guerilla band. In the darkness they could not distinguish their features well enough to know whether Kelley was with them or not.

But presently the guerillas had pulled together a heap of brush and lit it. The fire flamed up and all stood revealed to each other.

Then Will and the scout felt a thrill. They recognized the broad, cruel face of Cool Kelley. The guerilla leader was regarding them in a mocking way.

"Wal, my friends," he said, jeeringly, "ye didn't have much luck in running down Kelley, did ye?"

"Your time will come," said Preston.

"Your time has come," said the guerilla, savagely. "Truss 'em up, boys! I wanter see 'em swing."

A couple of the guerillas sprang forward. But quick as a flash Will Prentiss shot out with his fist and knocked them down.

"Don't lay hands on me, you vile dogs," he cried, angrily. "I am your prisoner, Kelley, and if you need my life, shoot me where I stand. Let me die as a man of honor should."

The two guerillas scrambled to their feet. Kelley, astounded beyond measure, glared at Will.

"Well, ye've got more cheek than anybody I ever heard of," he cried. "Do ye think ye're any better than I am? Thet's what ye intended to do with me, hang me higher'n a kite."

Will shivered with repulsion, but Preston whispered:

"Bluff him, boy! Give it to him."

"I am an officer in the Confederate army," said Will, proudly. "I demand proper treatment."

The villain hesitated. Something in the proud bearing of his prisoner seemed to impress him.

"What do ye consider proper treatment?" he asked, jeeringly.

"If you intend to take my life, stand me up at twenty paces and shoot me. That is proper treatment for a man of my rank and standing."

"Oh, is it? And ye would hang me?"

"You are a murderer!"

"What?"

"Evidences of your dark work may be found at the negro cabin of Floyd's, where your victims lie in one grave."

Kelley gave a start, and then his face broadened. He broke into uncontrollable laughter.

"Wal, thet beats me," he roared. "Do ye hear that, boys? Ha-ha-ha! that is the best yet."

Then he grew suddenly quiet, and said:

"So die all enemies of Kelley. But the pooty gal—she will soon be my wife. Oh, I tell ye, things are comin' Kelley's way. As soon as I have hanged you I'll go down and surround your smart company of Grays, and not one of 'em will live to tell the tale. I'm honey to my friends, but I'm the dickens and all to my enemies."

Will did not answer. He was too full of bitter reflections.

It certainly was a great misfortune that he had fallen into the hands of this dark scoundrel.

There seemed no hope. Rescue was not to be thought of. Escape was impossible.

Will Prentiss was no coward. He did not fear death, but he preferred to die on the battle field as a brave man should.

"Let me tell ye somethin'," said Kelley, who seemed to have a foolish sense of vanity. "I'm an officer of as high rank as you. I am a captain in ther Union army."

"I don't believe it," said Will, sharply. "They would never recognize you in any honorable company. You are a thief and a murderer!"

"What!" growled the guerilla chief, as he made a gesture as if to strike the boy captain. "Take care how ye insult me."

"It would be impossible to do that."

A snarling cry escaped Kelley.

"Now, ye've done it," he growled. "I'll not even hang ye. It's too merciful a death for ye, my proud bantam. I'll make ye beg, ye stiff-necked youngster. Tie him up thar, boys! We'll take him down ter camp an' roast him like a pig."

Again the two guerillas sprang forward to do their chief's bidding.

But Will simply made a little side-step and caught one under the ear and the other on the jaw. They both went down like ten-pins, a pair of much astonished rogues.

With a howl of rage, Kelley himself sprang forward.

"Try that on me, ye little game-cock," he yelled. "I'd like to see ye do that by me!"

"You'll get it if you try for it," said Will, coolly. "Stand off!"

Kelley was a powerful man. He weighed nearly two hundred pounds, and had muscles like an ox.

Will saw this at a glance, and knew that it would never do to let the brute get to close quarters with him.

"I'll spile yer figger-head for ye!" yelled the brute. "Stand up and take yer gruel!"

"Stand up yourself!" said Will, as he ducked a ponderous swing. "Look out!"

The young captain slid inside the brute's guard and pum-

meled him hard in the stomach. He dodged back and was out of reach in an instant.

Gasping for breath, Kelley doubled up like a jack-knife, and for a moment seemed to be knocked out.

CHAPTER X.

A QUESTION OF SCIENCE.

Will could have gone in and punched the guerilla chief into insensibility, he was in such a helpless state.

But he knew better than to do this.

He knew that the guerilla's brutish followers would all spring upon him and he might get the worst of it. The boy captain was as shrewd as he was clever.

Some of them did start forward, but a gesture from Kelley restrained them. The guerilla was stung by his defeat, and he wanted the satisfaction of evening matters up with the young captain, and he believed he could do it.

So, as he regained his breath, he gave way first to a flood of profanity and then cried:

"Ye took me foul! I'll clean ye out this time. No, git back, thar, men! I'm goin' to cut his comb myself. If I don't lick him I'll throw up my job as captain of this gang."

"You can't do it," said Will, coolly. "You are too slow, Kelley!"

"Am I?" roared the villain. "I'll show ye. No bantam weight is goin' to trim me."

"Look out for him, Prentiss," whispered the scout. "He is much heavier than you."

Will nodded his head, and holding up his hand, said:

"Wait a moment, Kelley. Let me say a word to you."

"Wal, be quick about it."

"We realize that we are prisoners and of course helpless in your hands. I knocked your men down because I objected to their touching me. It is not necessary to tie us up. Our word not to escape would be sufficient. Now, you are a heavier man than I. Why do you seek to fight with one so much weaker?"

"Wal," said the guerilla chief, "those two chaps you knocked over aren't babies. You bet they are strong. I'm kinder interested now ter see if you kin knock me out ther same way. If you kin you can have my shirt."

"I don't want it," said Will. "But I will make a wager with you."

"Wal?"

"If we fight we must fight fair. Your men must not interfere."

"You bet they won't. I don't want no help."

"All right! Now, I'll wager my company of Grays against the liberty of myself and my friend here that I knock you out in a finish fight."

Kelley grinned with eager delight.

"I'll take ye!" he cried. "You'll surrender yer Grays to me if I win?"

"Yes! I'll march them into your camp. On the other hand, if I win you are to set us both free. We are to be permitted to go our way unharmed."

Kelley hesitated. One of his men said:

"You're a fool, Kel! You've got the young cub in your hands. We'll hold him for ye and ye kin pummel him all ye please. Then ye kin hang him afterwards!"

"That is good satisfaction," said Will, satirically. "You have a classic education all right, my friend."

"Don't ye insult me," growled the fellow. "I'll mash ye like a fly."

"Git back thar, Woodbridge," said Kelley, angrily, "this is my stew."

The fellow, whose name was Woodbridge, stepped sullenly back. Kelley now pulled off his jacket.

"I'm goin' ter take your terms, bantam," he said. "If I win ye'll march yer Grays into my camp?"

"Yes," replied Will.

"All right! Here goes!"

The big brute squared away clumsily and made a lunge at Will. In his elephant-like manner, if he had landed, Will might have gone down and out.

But Will had no idea of letting the blow land. With the simplest possible movement of the head he dodged it. The guerilla, in overbalancing, came in close.

Swift as a flash of lightning, in fact so swift that the blow was hardly seen, Will landed his right full on his adversary's eye.

In an instant he was reeling back, seeing stars and moons innumerable. His vision in that optic did not return for a moment.

When he recovered himself it was to see his lithe antagonist cool and smiling but a few yards away.

With a roar like a bull Kelley started for him.

He made a terrific dive forward. Will stepped nimbly aside, and as he passed, dropped him like an ox.

A blow behind the ear took all the wind out of Kelley's sails. The blows given by Will had not great weight behind them, but they were planted in the right spot.

Will stepped back and began to pull on his military jacket. Preston the scout had been a surprised and delighted witness.

"Did ye put him out, boy?" he gasped. "I never saw anything like that in my life!"

"He is out," said Will. "He's coming to now, but he'll be dizzy for a while. We're out of this scrape, Preston."

"Do ye believe it?"

"If he isn't satisfied I'll finish him the next time."

Several of the guerillas had sprung to aid their chief, who was desperately trying to get to his feet.

Kelley, dazed and maddened, finally got up. He was like a mad bull.

"Whar's that insignificant leetle cub?" he yelled. "He don't fight fair! He hit me with a club! Let me at him!"

He started forward, but pitched upon his face. He got up this time and blood streamed from nose and mouth.

Kelley was done.

He stepped weakly back and began to cough violently. In his apoplectic condition it was a wonder that he did not drop dead.

Will and Preston stood waiting for him to recover. But now the burly Woodbridge came forward, crouching like a panther.

"Try me on at that game," he hissed. "See if ye kin do that thing ter me. When I'm done with ye, ye won't be good for shoestrings."

"Stand back," said Will, coldly. "I'm not bound to fight you."

"Ain't ye! By the Lord Harry, we'll see! Ye'll fight or I'll make ye eat dust!"

"My bargain was with your chief. I have won, and that ends it."

"No, it don't. I hev an account ter settle with ye!"

"Look here, Woodbridge, I warn you to stand back. Fair play every time. If you dare to attack me I'll make it worse for you. For you are no boxer, and you would get a thrashing."

A roar like a lion escaped the giant. He brandished his powerful arms and made a move toward Will.

The young captain saw at once that he was a different proposition from Kelley. While the latter was slow, he was like a panther, quick and shifty.

But he was not a boxer, as the young captain quickly saw. Will at once made up his mind what to do.

He was encouraged to see that the other ruffians had not offered to join him. He did not fear any one of them singly.

Woodbridge, quick as a cat, made a rush at Will. He aimed a sledge hammer blow at him, which Will barely escaped.

Then the young captain went under his guard for a handy drive in the stomach. The ruffian gasped and swung his heavy arms like flails.

In trying to get under the villain again, Will caught a blow from the giant and went down.

But he was up like a cat, as Woodbridge, with a yell of triumph, rushed upon him.

So confident was the guerilla that he was careless. Just the opportunity Will wanted was presented.

Quick as a flash he sent a stinging blow to Woodbridge's nose, and another to his jaw.

The claret flew in all directions. The burly ruffian rocked like a house under a high wind.

He was astounded and only more angry. He made another unguarded rush. Will, cool and alert, waited, and as the ruffian, as usual, overshot, he sent in a terrific drive to the point of the jaw.

Like a tree shattered by a bolt of lightning, Woodbridge rocked, quivered and went down in a heap. He was insensible.

Kelley, who had witnessed all, stood seemingly awed. Even the roughest of minds can be quelled by superior force.

"Jehú!" he gasped. "You must be the arch fiend himself! Woodbridge is the wust man in a scrimmage we've got."

Will coolly put on his coat.

"Good-night, Captain Kelley," he said. "I have been well entertained. We shall meet again—before long!"

"Hold on!" roared the guerilla chief. "Stop him thar, men! Don't let him go."

With bayonets the guerillas opposed Will's departure. The young captain showed surprise.

"Surely, you are satisfied, Kelley?" he asked, coolly.

"No, I'm not!"

"Oh! Do you want another round?"

"Not with you, blast ye! Do you think I'm such a fool as to let you go free?"

"What!" exclaimed Will. "Was not that the bargain?"

"Pshaw! What's thet amount to!"

"Are you not a man of your word?"

"My word! What's my word worth? Why should I stickle for honor? Nobody respects me! I can't get a regular commission in either army. Then why should I be particular about my word? If I had won would you hev marched your Grays up here jest to keep your word?"

"I certainly would have!" replied Will, promptly. "I never broke my word in my life. If you go back on your word now it shows what a coward and a liar you are!"

"Fiends an' furies!" roared the villain. "You dare talk to me that way? I'll have yer heart!"

Will folded his arms and faced the cowardly crew in a resolute, disdainful way.

"You are worse than that," he said, hotly. "You are viler and more dishonorable than the most miserable jackal on earth! Take my life, if you will! Break your word, you contemptible cur, you wretched hound!"

Kelley had crept nearer to Will, his fingers working convulsively, his face transformed with hatred. But the boy captain's words and manner caused him to cringe.

The bayonets of his murderous crew were close to Will's chest. A moment more and it seemed as if he would be stricken down.

But, even in that moment, Kelley drew a deep, hard breath.

"Put down your bayonets, boys," he said. "Ther cuss is goin' ter live long enough fer me to hev satisfaction."

The motley crew fell back. Kelley stood glaring at Will.

"Do ye know what I'm goin' to do with ye?" he snarled. "I'm goin' to tie ye to a stake an' roast ye alive by inches."

"I am not surprised," said Will, coolly; "that is the natural act of a barbarian."

"Ye'll call me worse afore I git through with ye."

"Perhaps I shall!"

Just then Preston the scout, who had been for a few moments unnoticed, did a surprising thing.

Before any one could interfere he dropped backwards like a shot and turned a back somersault into the gloom.

So quickly was it done that for an instant the guerillas

were dumfounded. Then a savage yell pealed from Kelley's lips:

"After him, ye fools! Don't let him escape!"

CHAPTER XI.

AGAIN CAPTURED.

The guerillas sprung after the wily scout. But they might as well have tried to track a Will-o'-the-wisp.

Preston was in the scrub growth of the hillside in an instant. The diversion was Will's salvation also.

For, while the guerillas rushed after Preston he was for a moment left unguarded. Kelley stood with his head turned.

Quick as lightning Will acted.

He launched himself forward and dealt the guerilla chief a stunning blow behind the ear that stretched him on the ground.

Then, whirling, he bowled over the next guerilla and grasped his musket. Right here he had a narrow escape.

The third guerilla fired at him point blank. The powder flash singed the skin of his temple, but the bullet went wild.

Will was away in the gloom like a deer. With a bellow like a mad bull, Kelley sent his men after him.

A fusillade of shots followed the young captain. But none of them reached him.

It was a most astonishing and daring piece of work.

Both prisoners had made their escape. It must be said that this could not have been done in daylight. It was certainly the darkness that aided them.

Will had no idea of the direction taken by Preston.

All he thought of was of making good his escape and getting back to his company. If he could do this he would try and hunt down the guerilla chief.

So he dashed on down the hillside until he was deep in the ravine.

As there were no sounds of pursuit behind him he paused to get his breath.

The sensations of the young captain can be better imagined than described. The transition was practically like that from death to life.

He had been a doomed man in the hands of his worst foe, who would not have scrupled a penny to kill him.

He was now free and safe to live and fight again for the Confederacy. It was to him a thrilling joy.

Will sat down on a mossy bank by a little rivulet.

All was dark about him in the timber. He could faintly see the sky overhead. At the moment his bearings were lost.

He did not want to go deeper into Wolf's Den, for he knew that it would lead him into greater danger.

He pondered the subject a while and then decided to follow the course of the little rivulet down.

It would lead to lower ground, and he felt that it ran out of the Den and not into it.

So he arose after a while and followed the course of the stream. For some while he plunged on through the woods.

He paused at times to listen, but hearing nothing he kept on.

After what seemed an interminable period Will came into an open. He saw that he had emerged from the ravine and was once again in the low land.

The rivulet here trickled into a larger stream, which attained the dignity of a brook. Will knew that all water from these streams found its way into the Chickahominy. So gradually he began to get his bearings.

He continued on down this little brook until he came to a rail fence.

Beyond was a highway and a small bridge. Will climbed the fence and reached the highway.

The young captain was quite tired now and sat down on the bridge to rest. While sitting there he pondered over the events of the last few days.

He regretted extremely that he had not succeeded in capturing Kelley. When he recounted the crimes of which the guerilla was guilty he shivered.

While Will sat there on the bridge he grew strangely drowsy. He did not intend to sleep, but was half in dream-land when a startling sound woke him up.

The clatter of horses' hoofs sounded on the highway. Will sprung up in alarm.

The troop of horse was coming in the gloom. At first he thought of leaping the rail fence and hiding in the grass.

But he changed his mind, and slipping over the edge of the bridge, slid under it. He was in water several inches deep, but he believed he was safe.

The troop were cantering, but as they reached the bridge slowed down to a walk. Will could hear them talking.

But he was congratulating himself that he was safe, and they would soon pass, when, to his dismay, he heard a sharp voice ring out:

"Halt! Ye can water your horses in this little brook, boys."

Will heard this with a chill. He could not get further under the bridge. If a light should be flashed over the edge of the culvert he would be seen.

He could hear the Union soldiers dismounting. For he assumed that they were Union troopers.

Several of the horses were led down to the edge of the brook. The first one scented Will and plunged back in affright.

"Whoa! there, you fool!" cried the trooper, angrily. "What ails you?"

"What's the matter there, Burton?"

"I don't know, Shaw. This fool of a horse won't drink here!"

"P'raps there's something in the water. Whoa! there, you fool! My horse is just as bad! Whoa!"

"What's the matter there, boys?" cried the captain of the troop, sharply.

"I don't know," was the reply. "We can't get these fool horses down to the edge of the brook."

"Sergeant, bring up a lantern. As soon as they see the water they'll be all right."

Will gave a little gasp and tried to creep further under the culvert. In doing so he splashed the water and that betrayed him.

"Hello!" cried a trooper, "there's some animal under the bridge here. Bring a light! What's this?"

The lantern rays flashed across the arch of the culvert. A great cry went up from the troopers.

"Heigho! It's a Johnny Reb! See his gray uniform? Hooray!"

All sorts of exclamations went up. Sharp sabres bristled over Will's head.

"Come up an' show yerself, Johnny!"

"Thought ye'd hide, eh?"

"Pretty clever, but the Yanks have got ye."

Will crept out and stood crestfallen before his captors.

"I surrender," he said. "Who is your captain?"

"I am captain," said a tall, military-looking man, who stepped into the lantern light. "Hello! You are a captain, too. What has brought you here?"

"I have lost my company," replied Will.

"Who are you?"

"I am Will Prentiss, captain of the Virginia Grays," was the reply. Instantly exclamations of interest went up.

"Will Prentiss of the Virginia Grays!" exclaimed the Union captain. "Well, I have heard much of you. I am Captain Jefts of Troop B. I am glad to know you, Captain Prentiss."

"The pleasure is mutual," said Will. "It would be greater under other circumstances."

"If I were your prisoner?"

"Ah, no! If it were a time of peace."

The Union captain laughed.

"You Southerners know how to turn a phrase deftly," he said. "Well, captain, I am compelled to give you a horse and ask you to accompany us a ways."

"I shall yield to your request, though not willingly," said Will. "I hope to be treated as a prisoner of war."

"You shall be, and I have no doubt an exchange will be arranged in due time. But I have some curiosity to know how you came here?"

"I was a prisoner in the hands of one of your commanders who was hardly as chivalrous or as just as you."

"Indeed! Who is he?"

"His name is Cool Jim Kelley!"

"The deuce! He is a guerilla!"

"True! But he claims to fight for the cause of the Union!"

"He is the greatest scoundrel unhung and a disgrace to the cause!" cried Captain Jefts. "So he was going to hang you, eh?"

"Yes!"

"He ought to be hanged himself. If he had his just deserts he would be swinging from a tree now. Ah, captain, you may be sure that he has little recognition among our generals."

"I am glad to know that," said Will. "Of course there are scapegoats on both sides."

"Certainly! Well, we will ride on. I am on my way to Seymour's headquarters. I shall there take my leave of you."

Will saw that the troop was a small one of only a score of men. It seemed that Captain Jefts had been on a scouting trip.

Will could hardly feel comfortable, though he knew that he was in better hands.

He was once more a prisoner, and his company was waiting for him still. He could hardly reconcile himself to the thought.

But he mounted a spare horse led by a trooper.

Then in their midst he rode away.

For some ways down the road they went at a moderate pace. It seemed to Will as if he was going in an opposite direction to that from which he came.

As a matter of fact this was not true. Also another fact of which Will did not dream was shortly to make itself apparent.

This was that the guerillas under Kelley had set out hot-foot on a circuit of the region about in an endeavor to recapture the escaped prisoners.

Kelley was never more savage and angry in his life.

Woe betide Captain Prentiss if he should capture him.

So it happened that of a sudden, as the little troop rode on, out of a side road dashed a body of mounted men.

They were superior in number, and as Captain Jefts pulled up his horse a hoarse hail went up.

"Halt! Who are ye? Friend or foe?"

Captain Jefts brought his men to a halt and replied:

"That depends! We are Union men. Who are you?"

"It's all right! We are Union men, too. I'm Captain Kelley of the Independents. Who are you?"

"I am Captain Jefts of Troop B."

Will gave a little cry of amazement.

"Captain Jefts," he said, in a low tone, "it is Cool Kelley the guerilla."

Jefts gave a start. Then he reined his horse nearer.

"Have no fear. You are my prisoner now." Then he called out to Kelley:

"Don't detain us. We are on special business for Seymour. Kindly let us pass."

"One moment, captain," said Kelley. "Have you seen or picked up a young Confederate captain on your way?"

"Yes!" replied Jefts, boldly. "He is in my custody now, and I am taking him to headquarters as a prisoner of war."

A yell of delight escaped Kelley.

"Ye've got him, have ye? Hooray! that is the best of luck. Wal, I'll trouble ye to turn him over to me!"

"Turn him over to you?" said Jefts. "Will you tell me why?"

"Why, sartinly. He belongs to me!"

"At the present moment he is in my charge."

"Oh, but ye don't understand. He escaped from me!"

"That don't make any difference. He is my prisoner and is going to headquarters with me."

A savage imprecation escaped the guerilla. He saw Jeft's point, and he knew he was the kind of a man to stand by it.

For a moment his face was black with baffled raging hate. Then a fierce and cunning resolution seized him.

"Do ye mean to say that ye're goin' to keep ther prisoner away from me?" he asked, in a hissing tone. "He was mine; he escaped from me, and I demand him."

"You admit that he escaped from you?"

"Yas."

"Well, in that moment he was your prisoner no longer. He is in my charge now."

"Oh, that's the way you look at it?"

"I do!"

"See here, Captain Jefts, I want that man. He's of no use to you. Why not turn him over to me? What's the use of being stuffy?"

"What would you do with him?"

"Hang him!"

"So I thought. He is a regular officer in good standing in the Confederate army. He is entitled to consideration as a prisoner of war."

"Oh! Is that your objection to giving him up to me?"

"Not altogether! I don't consider you have any claim upon him!"

"Wal, I do!" roared the guerilla chief, "and I kin tell you he is goin' to be mine. If you don't give him up without any more argument, I'll take him whether you will or no!"

"No, you won't!" cried Jefts. "I warn you not to interfere with us. We are on special duty for General Seymour."

"I don't keer a hang fer Seymour or any other man!" cried the guerilla chief. "I'll give ye one minute to turn him over to me, or I'll attack ye!"

"Company right! Draw sabres!" went up the ringing voice of Captain Jefts. The sabres rattled and the score of men waited the word.

"You see!" said Captain Jefts. "We are ready for you. I know you well, sir, for an atrocious scoundrel and coward! You attack us at your peril."

Will leaned forward in his saddle.

"Captain Jefts, let me be one to fight the scoundrel!" he cried. "Give me a sabre and let me talk with him. I pledge you my word of parole!"

"I accept your word," said Captain Jefts. "Sergeant, give him a spare sabre!"

This was done and Will spurred his horse forward. Kelley was giving orders to his men, when the young captain of the Grays shouted:

"Kelley, I want to talk with you!"

"Eh! you young cub!" roared the guerilla chief. "What do you want?"

"I have a proposition to make to you. It will save bloodshed!"

"What is it?"

"I will fight you single-handed with the sabre to decide which is to surrender to the other!"

The burly guerilla chief was silent a moment. The suggestion doubtless needed digestion. Suddenly he made reply:

"If I best ye in sabre play, ye'll surrender to me, and Captain Jefts will give ye up without a fight?"

"Yes!"

The wily brain of the villain took in the logic of this proposition.

It was to him a loophole to the evading of a conflict with Jefts. He really did not care to win the disfavor of the Union generals, which this would have insured.

On the other hand he was vain enough to believe that he could best the lithe young captain with a sabre.

Fighting with a sabre requires a strong wrist and forearm. Weight usually assists largely.

So the ruffian on impulse decided to accept. He cried:

"All right! It's a bargain! We'll settle the question single-handed!"

Captain Jefts now rode up to Will.

"Have you considered this matter fully?" he asked. "He is a heavy, strong man. He might bear you down."

"Very well!" said Will, coolly, "then I lose. Of course this proposition depends upon your willingness to relinquish your claim upon me as a prisoner."

"Do you honestly think you can beat him?"

"I do."

"Then I agree to it, for I am more than eager to see the scoundrel beaten."

CHAPTER XII.

ALL ENDS WELL.

Will Prentiss dismounted from his horse. He tested the sabre by pressing the blade across his thigh.

It was too dark for sword play, so a fire was built by the guerillas beside the road.

Then into the circle of light stepped the two swordsmen. On one side were grouped the guerillas, low-browed and villainous.

On the other side were the troopers. The two swordsmen advanced and raised their blades.

The next moment they flashed in midair and came together with a clang. The contest was on.

None there had ever witnessed the like of it. They parried and thrust, rallied and swept heavy semi-circles in the fire-lit air.

But for a long time neither seemed to have the advantage.

Will had constantly to give ground to his heavier antagonist. It seemed as if he played wholly on the defensive.

The reason for this was well calculated by the boy captain.

He knew that at the present moment the guerilla's wrist was stronger than his and that he could strike a harder blow.

After some time his wrist must weaken. So he saved himself and waited.

He found himself easily able to hold the defensive. But how the bout would have terminated was never known.

For a thrilling incident at that moment put a stop to the proceedings.

From the gloom came the sound of tramping feet.

A wild, ringing cheer went up on the air, and a volley of bullets swept a number of the guerillas from their feet.

Down through the gloom came the flash of bayonets and the gleam of gray uniforms.

"Virginia Grays! Charge, Virginia Grays!" went up the battle cry.

Will saw the charging line of his comrades with a wild thrill. A trooper, whose horse became unmanageable, dashed between him and Kelley.

In a moment all was confusion. It is hardly necessary to say that Will sprung toward his men and liberty.

In another moment he was embracing the old scout, Preston, and Fred Randolph, his lieutenant.

How delighted the Grays were at the rescue of their young captain can be imagined.

The guerillas, under the fire of the infantry, scattered and fled. Captain Jefts, with his troopers, dashed away, and Will always afterwards was half inclined to believe that it was by the chivalrous captain's design.

Explanations of course were quickly in order.

After making his escape from Kelley's gang at Wolf's Den, Preston had of course at once set out to hunt up the Grays.

He found them, and leaving the outpost prisoners under a safe guard, he led the Grays to the rescue of their young captain.

The Grays were on their way to the Den when they came thus suddenly upon the scene by the roadside.

"Well," cried Will, "our adventure to-night would read like a romance. I have been twice a prisoner, once escaped and once rescued."

"You are to take no more chances," cried Fred Randolph. "Hereafter you are not to go upon such dangerous expeditions. We can't afford to lose our captain."

Altogether it was a joyous reunion for all. But now the question was, what ought to be done?

"We can waste no more time looking for guerillas," decided Will. "It is already near morning. We must go back and report to General Longstreet with our prisoners."

"That's right," agreed Fred.

"You left them all safe, did you?"

"I think so. Ought we not to go back there at once?"

"Yes!"

So the Grays fell into line and started upon their return to camp. It was not long before they reached it.

Will knew the necessity of at once hastening back to the Confederate lines. The next attack upon the Union forces would certainly occur on the morrow.

He was, of course, anxious to get into that.

In due time the place of bivouac was reached. The guard and the prisoners were found all right.

The Grays now proceeded to get ready for the long march. They were soon under way with the Union prisoners in the centre.

Day was just breaking when they reached the Confederate picket line. The guard suffered them to march through the line.

Then, as in regular step, with the file of prisoners preceding them, they swung into the company street they met with a warm welcome.

The regiments on early parade drew up in line and cheered them. Those not in line rushed out of their tents and gave them an ovation.

"Virginia Grays! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

The cheers went up lustily. Will then turned the prisoners over to the provost guard and his boys turned into their quarters.

The Grays threw themselves down, quite exhausted, for a short sleep.

But Will went to report to General Longstreet, who was already astir. The Confederate leader greeted him warmly.

"Hello, Prentiss!" he cried, "I am glad to see you back. I have just received the news of your success and I congratulate you."

"Ah! but I have not met with success," dissented Will. "The Union troops baffled me, and I was so long held at bay that the wagon train escaped!"

"Bother the wagon train! You accomplished the important thing."

"What was that?"

"You left the Union guerillas and small detachments so busy that they could not find time to come around and attack us. That is a good deal."

"Well, if that is enough, we have certainly been successful," said Will. "We also captured the outpost and forty of its defenders!"

"Bravo! You have done well, Prentiss! Bye and bye, I have no doubt you will be wearing these."

He pointed to his general's shoulder-straps. But Will shook his head.

"No," he said, "I do not seek that. I prefer to fight the war out just as I am, plain Captain Prentiss, with my Virginia Grays."

General Longstreet looked surprised.

"That is unusual," he said. "We all look for advancement in the world."

"Yes, General Longstreet," said Will. "So do I in

everything but war. It is a great curse upon humanity. I shall be glad when there are no more rumors of war."

General Longstreet looked at the boy captain attentively. Then he bowed gravely.

"I respect you for those sentiments, Prentiss," he said.

"The greatest curse of humanity is indeed war."

"I believe so, General!"

"But it is inevitable. We must fight it out to the last. The South had better suffer honorable defeat in a just cause than be browbeaten and insulted by an arrogant faction at the North."

"Sometimes I wonder if we are not all mistaken," said Will, dubiously. "All the prominent Yankees I have met are as clean cut as our own people."

"Yes, I agree with you," said General Longstreet. "But war comes as a cycle. We have nothing to do with it. We could not prevent it, you or I."

"I fear you are a fatalist."

"So was the great Napoleon. All brave soldiers are fatalists. If one is to die by the sword, the decree cannot be revoked."

Will could not argue the matter. He was silent and thoughtful for some time. These were problems of a mighty sort which he knew were not to be solved.

"Well," said General Longstreet, finally, "how are your boys, Prentiss? How did they stand the march?"

"They are resting at present."

"You have not a full company?"

"No, but I look for recruits this morning to fill the ranks up."

"That is good! Every man will be needed to-day. The hardest fight of the war is ahead of us!"

"Ah! On the same battle ground?"

"Oh, no! General McClellan has fallen back to Gaines' Mill, five miles away. Hark! Do you hear that?"

The distant boom of guns was heard.

"Yes!"

"Do you know its meaning? General Stonewall Jackson has arrived from the Shenandoah Valley. He is attacking McClellan's right wing. We are to move this forenoon upon the centre."

Will's eyes sparkled.

"We must make it a great victory!" he cried. "When your division moves, General Longstreet, the Grays will be in the van!"

"Good! We shall not start for an hour yet. Snatch a little sleep yourself. I will send you an orderly to let you know when we start."

"Thank you, general! I will now say au revoir!"

Will saluted and hurried away. When he reached his tent he was glad to throw himself down and catch a nap.

When the orderly arrived, true to Longstreet's promise, Will sprung up and the Grays were called into line.

They had enjoyed but a brief rest, yet so high were their spirits that they set out on the march as bravely as ever.

As Will had promised, the Grays were in the van of the line. But before they had gone far, Colonel Joe English rode up and said:

"Captain Prentiss, General Longstreet sends you this."

Will took an envelope from his colonel's hand. He broke the seal and read:

"My Dear Prentiss:—You told me about the Union guerilla, Kelley, and his abduction of a farmer's daughter a few days ago. Now we have a prisoner under guard who sends me a remarkable story. He says that at a certain farmhouse down the Porter's Crossing road this young woman is attending a sick man. Through the valiant effort of some of your boys she escaped from the hands of Kelley and has sought refuge with an uncle whose name is Jeremiah Small. She is attending an invalid there and for the present is safe.

"But the guerilla, Kelley, has located her and is at this moment on his way to recapture her. I could send some other relief guard, but thinking you more interested than anyone else, I advise you to swerve from your present line of march enough to visit this house. If the guerilla has not already been there, warn the girl or take her away. At the same time you might set a trap for Kelley. Then rejoin us by way of the lower Gaines' Mill road. You will lose but little time and will not miss the fight at that. Report to me later.

Yours,

"LONGSTREET."

Will was electrified by the contents of this epistle. He handed it to Fred, who read it with interest.

"What will you do, captain?"

"Obey my superior's injunction," said Will. "Order the Grays to fall out of their line of march. If I mistake not, Porter's Crossing road is over yonder half a mile."

The order was at once given and the Grays dropped out and formed by the roadside. In a few moments they had vaulted the rail fence and were on their way across the fields to the Porter's Crossing road.

Down this they marched rapidly, until the roof of a farm house was seen just under a hill.

"It is Jerry Small's house," said one of the Grays. "I know him well."

A few moments later the Grays marched into the yard and stacked arms. Will went to the door.

It was opened by an elderly woman, who looked over her glasses at Will and asked:

"What can I do for you, sir?"

"I would like to ask if there is in your house a young woman named Harriet Craven?"

The woman hesitated, and Will rejoined:

"Have no fear! I am a friend. Tell her that Captain Prentiss of the Virginia Grays is here."

From an inner room came a wild, husky cry:

"For the love of heaven, do not let him go away, Mrs. Small! Show him in, quick! I must see him before I die!"

It was a masculine voice. Astonished beyond measure, Will stepped into the house. He gave a sharp cry.

On a cot bed lay a wasted, masculine figure! Hollow eyes looked up at Will.

"My soul! Sylvester Brown!" gasped the young captain.

"Yes, Will Prentiss! God bless you for coming. I have tried hard to send word for you. But nobody could find you. Sit down here. Yes, I am badly wounded! A stab in the side by that villain Kelley. It is a long story, and I must speak slowly."

Will then sat down by the brave young Californian's bed and heard the whole tale.

Brown and his companions went to Floyd's to rescue Harriet and found that Kelley and three of his men were there. A desperate fight followed.

Two of Brown's companions were shot dead. The other escaped and disappeared, Brown knew not where.

In the fight Brown managed to get Harriet out of the house and upon a horse. They rode to the Small house, where Brown broke down and had been between life and death since.

The young girl herself now came in.

She was very beautiful, and welcomed him in a sweet, gentle way.

"I feel that I owe much to you, Captain Prentiss," she said. "You aided Sylvester."

"Have you a good surgeon?" asked Will of the wounded man.

"I have good nurses," said Brown, with a smile. "That is better."

"Well," said the boy captain, "I hope you will not be shocked. But I must tell you why we are here. I learned that Kelley was on his way here to recapture Miss Craven."

The young girl gave a sharp cry, and the wounded man tried to rise.

"Keep very quiet," said Will. "He will run his neck into a noose. Have no fear."

Will went out and had the Grays seek refuge in the barn. He was not a moment too soon.

Down the highway rode six armed men. One of them was Kelley. The guerilla dismounted and marched arrogantly up to the house. He was about to burst rudely in, when a stern voice called:

"Halt and surrender, or you die!"

In a moment the Grays swarmed about the guerilla chief and his companions. He fought desperately, but was overpowered.

Then the boy captain of the Grays went into the house and said:

"Good people, you will never again need to fear this dark scoundrel. Before another day passes he will have paid the penalty of his sins."

And this was verified. The prisoner reached the field at Gaines' Mill just before the great battle opened. General Longstreet called out a file of men, and Cool Kelley was shot at twenty paces. So ended his vile career.

We might say here that Sylvester Brown lived, and in after years married Miss Craven. But they never forgot Captain Will Prentiss and the Virginia Grays.

Perhaps Preston the scout was more pleased than anyone else to learn of the fate of Kelley.

But the Grays were now at the front on the second day of the great Seven Days' Battle. What they achieved and how they won renown, we will leave for another story.

THE END.

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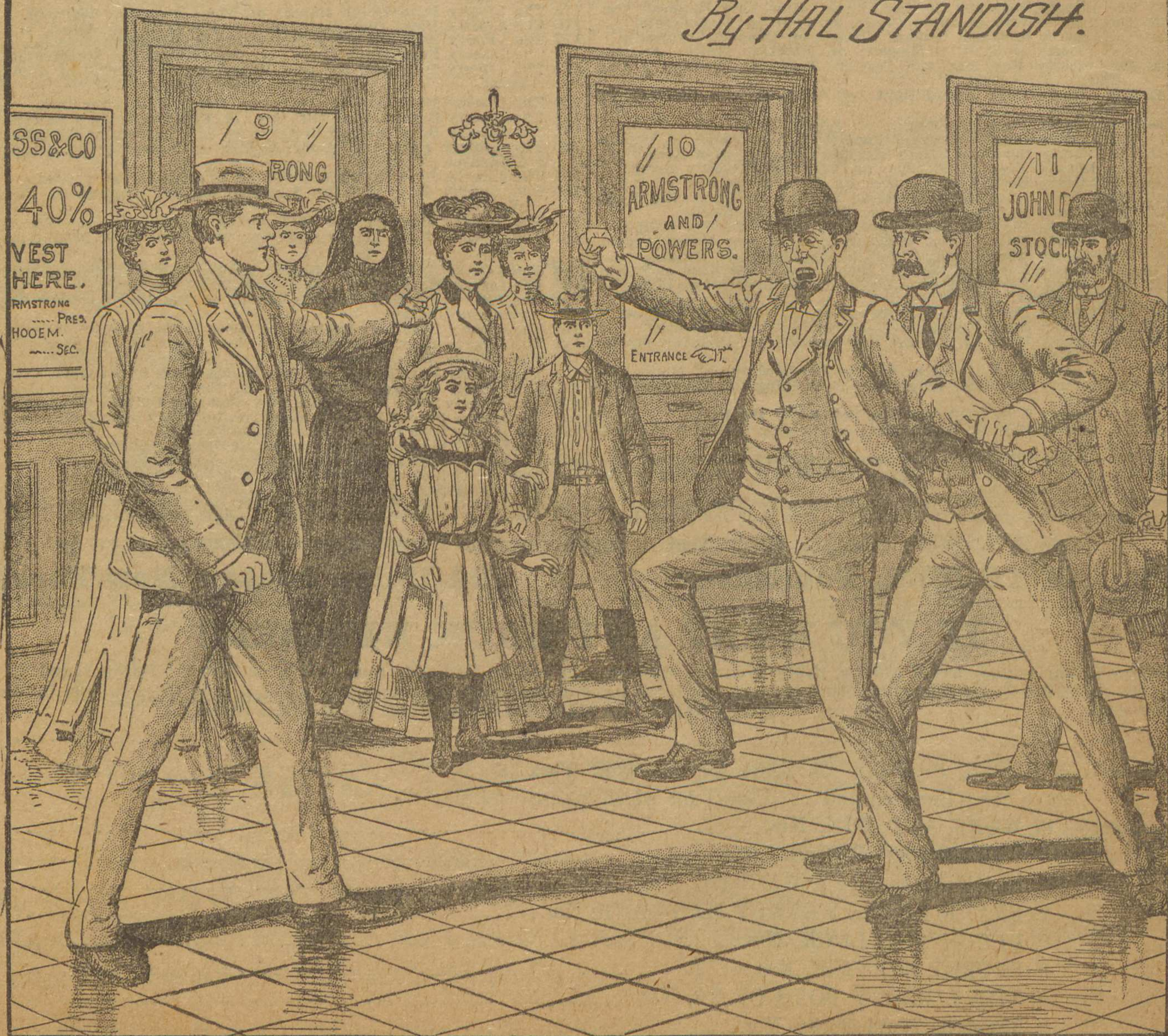
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